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Weaning as a creative and critical reading

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THESIS SUMMARY:

My research identifies an emerging trend among writers working on the borders of fiction and non-fiction for novels that function as aesthetic autobiographies. These works articulate ways in which the lived experience of the writer intersects with the artistic expression of these experiences. I examine novels by Rachel Cusk, Elena Ferrante, Sheila Heti, Jhumpa Lahiri and Deborah Levy as well as non-fiction texts by these authors. I argue that works by these women writers form a conversation of the kind Helene Cixous urges in her essay 'The Laugh of the Medusa' and I view the resulting work as a female countercanon. Further, I argue that these works constitute a canon of motherhood, to which my own novel *The Weaning* might belong. As a way of furthering my understanding of my own creative practice I consider the exchange that occurs between writer and proxy, writer and text, writer and reader, reader and text as a process of literary weaning.

Keywords: Absence, autobiography, autofiction, Barthes, Cixous, Cusk, countercanon, creative practice, creative writing, domestic, erasure, experimental fiction, feminine ecriture, Ferrante, Irigaray, Lahiri, Levy, motherhood, proxy, realism, reality, representation, surrogacy, translation, weaning, Winterson, witnessing, women's writing

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Introduction:

This thesis comprises two parts; a critical essay and a creative component. The creative component takes the form of a novel called *The Weaning*. The critical study is divided into three sections: ‘Introduction’, ‘The Writer and her Proxy’ and ‘Writing and Disappearing’.

In this introduction I provide a context for my research and I discuss what research questions informed the writing of my novel. I consider the literary and historical tradition in which I have produced my creative work and I propose a theoretical approach with which my novel and the other works under discussion might be read, introducing the notion of ‘literary weaning’.

In section 2, ‘The Writer and her Proxy’, I explore ways in which the writers in my study have created stand-ins for the writer self and I explore what these surrogates bring to the text for reader and writer alike.

In section 3, ‘Writing and Disappearing’, I consider what happens to the writer’s proxy once a writer is successfully weaned and she completes the writing of her book.

‘Weaning as a Creative and Critical Reading’ provides a bridging section between the critical element of my thesis and the creative research. Part Two mimics the narrative structure of the weaning process: My novel extends an invitation to the reader, introduces them to a surrogate figure in the shape of the novel’s protagonist, Bobbi, and once the reader has finished reading, character and reader return to a state of independence from one another. Part Two provides the answer to one of my earliest research questions (‘who is my proxy?’) and demonstrates the usefulness of weaning as a metaphor in understanding issues around representations of the self.

Coming to write *The Weaning*

I funded my Masters study in Creative Writing at Kingston University by working as a childminder and *The Weaning* started life as an autobiographic project describing this work. Initially conceived as a series of vignettes of the families I worked with, my earliest research questions focussed on how to achieve ethical standards and maintain confidentiality whilst adequately representing the experience of looking after other people's children in writing. My research proposal outlined my intention to investigate female autobiographic practice as a way of deepening my understanding of my own creative endeavour. I made a note that I was keen to prevent 'the autobiographical focus of my creative practice from becoming too narrow.' It's clear to me now that even in those early stages of my research, I was weaning myself off the idea of writing autobiographically.

How is it possible to write the self? This was one of the research questions informing this work and first drafts of the creative work were unsatisfactory in providing an answer. In particular I was troubled by the 'I' of a first-person account and the question of who this 'I' might be. I found myself asking the kinds of secondary questions Micaela Maftai mentions in her 2013 book *The Fiction of Autobiography*:

What did it mean to write the truth when writing autobiographically? Did it mean only including material that could be externally verified? What did *that* mean? Only including events and descriptions that could be corroborated by other individuals involved? Or information that had been verified by some independent source? [...] Did it mean refusing to include any reported speech that had not been recorded, as there was no way to ensure the accuracy of such quoted words? Did it mean refusing to write about anyone but myself, since I could not ensure I was representing anyone but myself accurately (even if that is possible)? [...] the way one represents oneself can ring false upon later self reflection, quite often making us poor self-judges. (2013, p. 2)

Like Maftai, I searched for a critical framework within which to understand autobiography and as with Maftai, it was the first-person narrative mode which caused me difficulty. Reflecting on this difficulty now that my research is complete, the issue of narrowness in relation to my initial autobiographical focus seems key. As I considered newly published works in the field, including Rachel Cusk's 2012 divorce memoir *Aftermath* and her 2014 novel *Outline*, the first volumes of Karl Ove Knausgaard's 'autobiographical novel' and the first of Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan novels, additional research questions emerged, relating to form: What kind of writing distinguishes memoir from fiction? How does the position of the writer in relation to their material influence form? When is a novel not a novel? David Shields's 2011 book *Reality Hunger* provoked further questions: How was it possible to write autobiography a time when borders between autobiography and other forms of writing were increasingly fragile? Quite swiftly, I moved towards the idea of writing a fictional story. Later, coinciding with a flurry of books around motherhood (see Elkin, 2018), I questioned how a straightforwardly autobiographic account of taking care of other people's children was possible in the context of increasingly complex relations between motherhood and writing.

.I struggled with the idea that my identity was the same as the one belonging to the protagonist emerging in the writing. As Maftai observes, 'this was a potentially inaccurate identification, especially as more and more time elapsed between the lived experience and the time of writing. The relationship between writing oneself into existence and identifying oneself as the subject of an autobiographical work was problematic' (2013, p. 3). The phrase 'writing oneself into existence' is helpful in charting the progression of my research. Like Maftai, who

ended up writing a series of short stories, once I rejected the idea of writing autobiographically it seemed natural to consider fiction as a surrogate or alternative mode and the protagonist of the written work became *not I*.

A breakthrough moment occurred when I read Lukacs's description of Kafka as one of the greatest realist writers: 'he found a direct, uncomplex way of communicating this basic experience; he did so without having recourse to formalistic experimentation' (2006, p.77).

Finding a direct and uncomplex way of communicating experience was also my goal and I was especially alert to the mention of Kafka since his influence was formative in the making of my writing self.¹ Taking Lukacs's view of Kafka as 'realistic' as my cue, I committed to a fictional mode.

I was confirmed in this decision when I read the final chapter of Rachel Cusk's 2012 divorce memoir *Aftermath*. Cusk has long been an influence on my writing and reading tastes - I chose Kingston University for my Masters Creative Writing study because she was a tutor there at the time. The final chapter of *Aftermath* is written in the third person, shifting away from the first person narrative voice which operates throughout the rest of the book. The fact that this final chapter takes the au-pair's view of the family indicates a further remove the writer has made, away from her own experience. I took this to be an answer to my research question concerning how it is possible to write the self, as if Cusk was showing me how fiction might evolve out of autobiography. Cusk's work assured me of the possibilities of fiction as a means of self-representation.

¹ My first play was an adaptation of Kafka's *The Burrow* (published in *Comparative Criticism*, Cambridge University Press, 1992)

Committed to writing a novel based on my lived experience, the solution of fiction provoked a series of further research questions involving the ‘I’ that had troubled me in the early stages of the autobiographic project: If I was to write from a first person point of view, who was this ‘I’? What proximity did she have to me? How close was her experience to mine as a writer? As a childminder? As a mother? While I grappled with ways of understanding the creative process, the intimacy of the relationship between writer and character became apparent. I began to acquaint myself with this proxy and started to perceive what use she might serve. Whilst my aim was to arrive at ‘the reality of the fiction’ (Zizek, 2015), conversely, perhaps, I found Gertrude Stein’s description of Matisse’s practice of ‘distorted drawing’ helpful, ‘as a dissonance is used in music or as vinegar or lemons are used in cooking or egg shells in coffee to clarify’ (2001, P.46). I distorted my experience in order to arrive a true portrait, truer in its way, perhaps, than any attempt at writing an absolute ‘truth’ could possibly be. In translating my experience as a childminder into a fictional character’s experience of being a childminder, I arrived at a depiction of my psychological life that I wasn’t aware of when I began writing. I explore this further at the beginning of Part Two of this thesis.

In addition to the relationship between writer and character, the intimate and collaborative relationship between writer and reader also presented itself. These relations seemed to me to bear some similarity to the relationship that exists between parent and child, which seemed helpful, given I was writing about childminding and about relationships between child and substitute parent, between parent and substitute parent. I grew aware of what Rachel Cusk has referred to as ‘the fascinating parallel between literary and procreative culture’ (Cusk, 2013). The development of an independent written self and the detachment of this narrating childminder

character from my own childminding writing self seemed akin to the process by which a growing child establishes independence from its parent. Weaning became a central metaphor in the developing creative work and gave me a title for the novel.

Research Context

The critical element of this thesis proposes a literary context as well as an academic context in which the themes and aims of my creative research might be understood and further, ways in which the current moment in fiction might be understood. This section will comprise a brief survey of the literary historical tradition in which I have written my novel as well as providing a Literature Review listing my selected texts.

My research interests lie in contemporary fiction and how current writers resolve the difficulty of adequately representing the world they live in. In *Rootprints*, Helene Cixous writes about being in dialogue with certain texts (1997, p.57), citing Stendhal's *Vie de Henri Brulard* (1890) as a book which reinforces what she writes. I am keen for my creative practice to be in dialogue with women reading and writing in the same moment. For this reason, I have made my selection of texts from a range of works published since I began this project in 2012.

The works I consider are Rachel Cusk's memoir *Aftermath* (2012) plus her Outline trilogy: *Kudos* (2018), *Transit* (2016), *Outline* (2014) and Elena Ferrante's tetralogy of Neapolitan novels: *My Brilliant Friend* (2012), *The Story of a New Name* (2012), *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay* (2013), *The Story of the Lost Child* (2015), translated by Ann

Goldstein. Other texts which illuminate my areas of interest in these works include Sheila Heti's *Motherhood* (2018), Jhumpa Lahiri's *In Other Words* (2016) and Deborah Levy's 2016 novel *Hot Milk*.

Since these are current works, there is less scholarly criticism available on them than might be the case for a thesis considering earlier works. As a result, my research draws on contemporary literary journalism as well as academic texts. Literary journalism is valuable in revealing how these books are received and showing the kinds of discourse arising out of them. Author interviews offer insight into how the authors of these texts interact with this discourse and contribute to it. Literary criticism supporting this study includes articles and interviews from *The Guardian*, *The New Yorker*, *The Paris Review* as well as other publications and online sites containing interviews with the authors plus reviews of other relevant works. In addition to book reviews, newspaper interviews and a collection of academic conference papers on the work of Elena Ferrante, I also refer to a series of blog posts by the academic writer Jonathan Gibbs. Writers whose approaches I found instructive during this period of creative and critical research include Roland Barthes, Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Melanie Klein, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Gertrude Stein. Finally, my own creative practice served as a means of theorising the work of other writers and in this way the dialogue which Cixous mentions comes about.

A countercanon of Motherhood

In an introduction to the 2017 creative anthology *Writing Motherhood* Carolyn Jess-Cooke writes about rejections poets Sharon Olds and Hollie McNish received on account of their writing about motherhood being deemed too ‘niche’ (2017, p.10). Olds’s experience of this prejudice dates back to the 1970s but McNish’s was more recent. Given the proliferation of mother/child imagery in books being published during the course of my research it is difficult to imagine a woman writer having her work rejected with this excuse now. Indeed, in 2018 Lauren Elkin wrote an article for *The Paris Review* with the title ‘Why All the Books About Motherhood?’ arguing that a ‘countercanon’ is emerging, putting motherhood on the map’. Elkin considers a ‘new crop of mother writers and nonmother writers’ set apart by their approach to motherhood as the ‘spur to thinking about the nature of creativity and its relationship to gender, and to exploring these questions in work that is formally challenging’ (Elkin, 2018). She associates the emerging trend for writing about motherhood with an interrogation of the nature of creative practice itself. Her observation that recent writing about motherhood engages in experiments with form is also evident in Jacqueline Rose’s comments in an article for *The Guardian* by literary journalist Alex Clark. Rose relates the need for ‘a truer account of motherhood’ to a need for the creative voice of fiction (Clark, 2018a). She echoes Jess-Cooke’s intention to ‘re-think representations of and debates about motherhood vs writing, and to champion literature that provokes a more honest and nuanced engagement with the female experience’ (2017, p.15). In a bid to express their ideas effectively and reflect their experiences honestly, the writers I have chosen to examine for my research challenge formal constraints and exploit fictional techniques. In this way, these writers and their texts provide the response both Rose and Jess-Cooke are after.

Elkin groups ‘mother writers and nonmother writers’ but Jess-Cooke poses an important question about whether the literature of motherhood is ‘polarizing against women without children’ (2017,p.11). Jess-Cooke appears to anticipate Sheila Heti’s negotiation of motherhood versus non-motherhood in her 2018 book *Motherhood*. In Heti’s book the author debates whether or not to have a child and considers how having a child might impact on her work as an artist. In this respect, Heti’s book contributes to the discussion Jess-Cooke’s book provides, which was the result of a 2014 Arts Council England project that toured literary festivals to discuss the impact of motherhood on women’s writing. The central dilemma in Heti’s *Motherhood* also echoes the conflict between maternal instinct and ‘art monster’ explored in Jenni Offill’s 2015 novel *The Department of Speculation*.

Heti’s book is significant to my research in that although its protagonist shares the same name as the author (as do other books by Heti) and its content bears some relation to the circumstances of Heti’s lived experience, as discussed by Heti on various platforms, the author identifies the book as a novel (Zucker, 2017). Recent fiction which apparently draws heavily on the writer’s circumstances outside the book they have written and examples of autobiographic writing which conversely employs fictional technique have created a host of new literary terms as literary critics and authors alike re-imagine and re-draw certain formal boundaries shaping and defining these books.

Heti is one of the writers mentioned by Clark in another *Guardian* article ‘Drawn From Life: why have novelists stopped making things up?’ (Clark, 2018b). Heti’s work often features a protagonist who shares her name and other characters who are named after living people. In a 2017 podcast hosted by the American writer Rachel Zucker, Heti is clear that part of her

motivation in referring to her books as novels is to mitigate against a tendency she perceives ‘that women don’t really have an imagination the same as men do, like men invent and women sort of just take directly from their lives’ (Zucker, 2017). For Heti the term novel helps convey the message ‘I do have actually have an imagination and not just imagination, I can think objectively about what I’m doing, I’m not just lost in the morass of self [...] there are formal choices being made’ (Zucker 2017). In this regard, Heti and the other writers under discussion can be considered the ‘figures capable of imagination’ mentioned by Harold Bloom when he considers poets who ‘make history by misreading one another, so as to clear imaginative space for themselves’ (1997, p.5). They perform acts of creative correction in their writing and wilfully appropriate elements of a male canon which serve their purpose in representing individual female experience. In proclaiming a feminine subject, these writers alter literary convention and bend it into their own shape, thereby consciously acknowledging the ‘specificity of their relationship to the imaginary’ which Irigaray mentions in *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1985, p.133). As part of my research, I consider the significance of motherhood as a subject in the clearing of space by women writers in a patriarchal literary tradition and I explore issues of form prompted by books such as Heti’s, which lead me closer to being able to answer the question ‘when is a novel not a novel?’

During the course of this research project the number of male writers and critics featured in literary journals and periodicals across the world consistently outweighs female contributors by approximately two thirds (Vida report, 2016). J.M Coetzee and Karl Ove Knausgaard are two writers operating on the borders of fiction and autobiography and writing about parenthood but I

have chosen to focus on women writers for this study, in order to play a part in redressing the gender imbalance in my chosen field.

Since my research concerns itself with a group of writers who can be described as creating a countercanon focussed on motherhood, it seems important to consider what, if anything, differentiates writers writing about motherhood in terms of gender and maternal status. In an article for *Candor* magazine, which predates her 2017 podcast, Rachel Zucker discusses the opposition between mothers and non-mothers with Sarah Manguso and Manguso comments that in creating such a dichotomy ‘we weaken all women against the reigning culture of men’ (Zucker, 2009). This occurs in the literary sphere, too. In creating a countercanon, female experience of all kinds - and women’s writing about all kinds of female experience - needs to be enlisted as a means of establishing equality, not only among women but also as a means of affirming female experience as worth writing about, instead of consigning it to what Elena Ferrante has referred to as a ‘literary gynaeceum’ (Schappell, 2015). In *Motherhood* Heti comments on her unwillingness to be defined by her choice not to have children, pointing out that her wish not to be labelled as a non-mother can be equated with women writers who have children wishing to be considered free of any reference to their maternal status. In this way, both writer-mothers and child-free writers are ‘not not-mothers’ and what at first seems a binary opposition is in fact unifying:

To those who would say, *You’re not a mother*, I would reply, ‘In fact, I am not *not* a mother.’ By which I mean I am *not* ‘*not a mother*.’ Yet someone who is called a mother could also say, ‘In fact, I am not not a mother.’ Which means she is a mother, for the *not* cancels out the *not*. To be *not not* is what the mothers can be, and what the women who

are not mothers can be. This is the term we can share. In this way, we can be the same. (2018, p.158)

I find Heti's argument convincing – her point is an important one, I think. For the purposes of this thesis, and in order to achieve the sharing Heti mentions and avoid the 'polarizing' Jess-Cooke refers to, I consider parent-child relations in purely literary terms rather than drawing any parallels between a writer and their parental status outside of their written work.

In the article for Candor, Zucker asks 'is a mother still also, a woman? Or does she lose something of her womanhood in becoming a mother?' (Zucker, 2009). I argue that womanhood and writerly identity are often conflated in the texts I have studied for my research and these texts express the loss Zucker mentions. I consider this loss within the context of the individual works under scrutiny and this constitutes part of the loss I describe in section 3 'Writing and Disappearing'.

In the 2017 podcast, Zucker, Heti and Manguso discuss a poetics of motherhood and Manguso comments that she views the division of women according to their maternal status as a problem of empathy between different groups of women. Manguso sees this as an indicator of wider problem of empathy among different groups of humans, divided along lines of race and class. Manguso perceives motherhood as a means by which to expand an idea of what written form can be and puts forward the notion that one doesn't have to be a mother in order to write empathically about motherhood and contribute towards the growing genre of writing about motherhood. She mentions Jules Renard's 1894 'autobiographical non-novel' *Poil de Carrotte* as an example of someone writing about motherhood from beyond this binary (Zucker, 2017). In

this way, she resists essentialism when it comes to female writerly identity and issues around writing about motherhood. However, later in the conversation Manguso withdraws Renard as a candidate for any kind of countercanon because she comes to understand that a poetics of motherhood needs to be informed by issues of femininity and the non-canonical attributes of the writer. As a male writer, Manguso concludes, Renard has the potential for canonical status in a way that female writers don't. I exclude male writers from my research for this same reason.

The kinds of literary works that most interest Manguso, Zucker and Heti are works that are 'polluted' with impurities they consider to be bound up with female identity 'things that don't belong in literature' (Zucker, 2017). But doesn't this notion of pollution and contamination imply that a male canon constitutes the 'pure' form, the standard against which female writing is judged or weighed? Instead, it is more helpful to consider an alternative canon, pure in its own right. In her 2001 book *Autobiography* Linda Anderson writes about the possibility that genre can be seen as creating 'dynastic relations between texts, encoding tradition in formal features which operate like 'family characteristics' (2001, p.10). She refers to Alistair Fowler's view of how genre works to create a tradition of similar texts through a kind of 'genealogical imperative' and quotes Fowler's idea of each work as 'the child... of an earlier representative of the genre and may yet be the mother of a subsequent representative.' (2001, p.10). In this thesis, I discuss ideas around text-as-child less in relation to literary tradition and more in terms of the creative process of writing. Many critics have argued that no literary work occurs in a vacuum since they all respond to previously written works (Bloom, 1997). Given this idea of a textual family tree, it is exciting to consider what future offspring the works by women writers mentioned in this essay might bear.

Autobiographic inheritance

This new wave of writers writing about motherhood and experimenting with form reaches back to a tradition of self representation and by way of answering my research question ‘how it is possible to write the self?’ I offer a brief survey of this tradition. I interweave a consideration of these earlier writers’ concerns with those concerns I perceive in the writers I have studied as part of my research.

Saint Augustine’s *Confessions* are often cited as the origin of modern Western autobiography (Anderson, 2001, p.18). In her book *The Tradition of Women’s Autobiography* Estelle Jelinek comments that Augustine ‘had no need to justify himself or prove his authenticity’ compared with early female writers such as St Teresa, Julian of Norwich or Margery Kempe who were outcasts and non-conformists (2003, p.46). Jelinek suggests that the consequence of this social status means early female self-representations ‘lack the assertive confidence of their male counterparts’ (2003, p.46). This issue of assertiveness feels significant in terms of the modern female writing I have looked at during my research, all of which exhibits great confidence. This at least is cause for celebration.

Augustine addresses his confessions to a god but for a non-religious reader/writer coming to his text in the twenty-first century his words and his mention of ‘creation’ take on a literary and artistic complexion. ‘You fill all things’, Augustine declares ‘but do you fill them with your whole self?’ (1961, p23). Augustine’s question reflects my early difficulty with the

autobiographic mode and concerns over what to put in, what to leave out. The selection process seemed too open to bias and too self-serving for an authentic written self to be possible. I was troubled by issues of scale, which also bothered Augustine: ‘The whole of creation is too small to hold you and therefore holds only a part of you’ (1961, p23). Any editing of my lived experience seemed to risk the authenticity of my written account and yet how was it feasible to include everything I said or did as a childminder? I found my way to a solution via Jeanette Winterson’s Introduction to *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit* in which she writes ‘I wanted to use myself as a fictional character an expanded ‘I’ (2014, p. xiii). I discuss this idea of an ‘expanded I’ in section 2 ‘The Writer and her Proxy’.

Winterson’s 2011 memoir *Why be happy when you can be normal?* revisits material which provided the basis for her 1985 novel *Oranges are not the only fruit*. The image of her mother’s body filling the phone box echoes Augustine’s description of his soul, ‘like a house, small for you to enter, but I pray you to enlarge it’ (1961, p. 24). ‘Who needs Skype?’ Winterson asks, ‘I could see her through her voice, her form solidifying in front of me as she talked. [...] She filled the phone box. She was out of scale, larger than life. She was like a fairy story where size is approximate and unstable. She loomed up. She expanded.’ (2012, p.3). It is significant that Winterson describes the mother’s body in conjunction with modes of communication including telephone and Skype, since her writing and the book we are reading is her chosen method of communication. In mentioning fairy stories and invoking an Alice in Wonderland kind of distortion she implicitly acknowledges the instability of the process of writing and imagining.

Augustine's vision of his soul is of a house in ruins and he asks 'you' to 'remake' it. 'You' is God for Augustine but perhaps 'you' could also refer the reader. Readers re-make the writer in the books they read, re-fashioning the author according to their own interpretation of character, especially in books narrated by the first person. This can be problematic, as Cusk, Ferrante, Heti, Winterson and others have observed, because it often results in straightforwardly autobiographical readings of women's work and resists the idea that a woman writer has employed her imagination. In *Why be happy when you can be normal?* Winterson writes 'I was trying to get away from the received idea that women always write about 'experience' [...] why could there not be experience *and* experiment? Why could there not be the observed and the imagined?' (2012, p. 3).

This question of 'the imagined' was one that exercised me early on in my research and, given the proximity of an autobiographic account to 'truth', coupled with the challenge to produce an account of the self which feels authentic, it is inevitable that the earliest writers have struggled with this same issue. The opening statement of Rousseau's 1782 *Confessions* announces his purpose as being to show 'a man in all the truth of nature; and this man shall be myself' (2000, p.5). However, in the portrayal of self how are we able to show 'all the truth of nature'? Regardless of questions that arise as to what is true, issues of 'showing' necessarily involve an artistic and performative element likely to detract from the level of accuracy implied in the phrase 'truth of nature'. Writers I examine in later sections of this essay have found a solution to this problem, and to issues around reader susceptibility to overly biographical readings of their work. Their solutions often centre around the idea of 'showing' and play with the eagerness with which readers reach for a biographical reading, exploiting this tendency in

order to alert us to it. In doing so, these writers bend narrative form, blurring the boundaries between memoir and fiction.

In *Reality Hunger* David Shields quotes Dave Eggers's opinion that writing semi-autobiographical fiction is like driving a car in a clown suit (2011, p. 47). This image expresses the performative nature of both practices and is expressive of the altered state that occurs during the writing process and the anarchy of the writing of the self - there is freedom but there is also extreme difficulty - how is it possible to control the car's brakes and accelerator, for example, in a clown's oversized shoes? It is dangerous, and there is the possibility of ridicule and even potential casualties. The writer can count themselves as one such casualty – as well as driving the car in clownishly unsuitable footwear, we render ourselves vulnerable to the possibility that readers will mistake 'I' as an accurate representation of our 'true' self.

In the second volume of what she refers to as her 'living autobiography', Deborah Levy announces her ambition to 'write in the first person, using an *I* that is close to myself and yet is not myself.' (2018, p.45). This was something I grew interested in during my research and developing a first-person narrator who closely resembled me yet remained distinct became my main creative task.

For any writer interested in self representation, Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* remains a touchstone and Karl Ove Knausgaard is considered by many recent commentators to be Proust's literary descendent, with *Granta* publishing his answers to 'the Proust Questionnaire' and *The Guardian* describing him as 'Norway's Proust' (Knausgaard, 2018 & Hoby, 2014). Knausgaard's frankness in writing about masturbation could equally identify him as Rousseau's successor given Rousseau's repeated reference to the habit (2000, p.xxiv). Knausgaard's

autobiographical novel consists of six volumes so above all, perhaps its length invites comparisons with Proust's seven volume project. In spite of appearing to render life as he remembers it, though, Knausgaard seems keen to demonstrate the artifice he is engaged with in attempting to render the self in words. Michel Faber notes 'an air of unedited truth to the project' but the descriptions of 'merciless specificity' Faber refers to in his review of Knausgaard's first volume *A Death in the Family* are the writer's way of alerting the reader to his contrivance and in doing so, serve as a reminder of the constructedness of the life portrait (Faber, 2012). In an extended passage describing the journey to a child's party, for example, Knausgaard writes 'I steered the buggy over the kerb onto the road to pass three people walking so damned slowly, probably thought they owned the pavement, walked a few metres as fast as I could and steered back onto the pavement after we had passed them' (2013, p. 21). In writing detailed prose of this kind, the author draws reader attention to the fact that he isn't pushing a buggy, he is writing about pushing a buggy. His emphasis forces the reader to confront the conventions of the work and to recognise the reader-writer complicity involved in the construction of the world of the book. A later description of a visit to the theatre supports this view and provides a clue as to Knausgaard's ambition:

there had to be something else [...] a kind of boundlessness arose, something wild and reckless. Into it disappeared plot and space, what was left was emotion, and it was stark, you were looking straight into the essence of human existence, the very nucleus of life, and thus you found yourself in a place where it no longer mattered what was actually happening. Everything known as aesthetics or taste was eliminated. [...] the details disappeared into the state they evoked, which was one of total presence, burning hot and ice-cold at once. However, if you hadn't allowed yourself to be transported, everything that happened would have appeared exaggerated, perhaps even banal or kitsch. (2013, p.182)

In writing endless descriptions of coffee making and buggy pushing, Knausgaard risks readers finding his account banal or kitsch but his aim is to remind us that it doesn't matter what is happening. Individual details disappear into the state they evoke, which is one of the total presence of the writer. Seemingly contradictorily, the attention given to apparently superficial action and behaviour surfaces the writer's process and by doing so, invites the reader to question the authenticity and the authority of the text in their hands. Knausgaard's technique highlights the disjunction between the writer and 'I' and alerts his reader to the way in which any project of writing the self is compromised as soon as a textual self makes its appearance, even if this textual self announces itself as 'I' and even if this 'I' appears to share the identity (indicated by name, for example) of the book's author.

Knausgaard's work, like Sheila Heti's, appears to honour the agreement Philippe Lejeune writes about in his 1973 essay, 'The Autobiographical Pact'. The agreement Lejeune describes exists between the author's name, which should refer to a real person, and the book's narrator. Lejeune writes 'autobiography is not a guessing game [...] the author either identifies himself as author, narrator and protagonist, or he does not – in which case, it is not autobiography' (1986, p.13). It can be, Lejeune suggests, an autobiographical novel, and this is how Knausgaard and/or his publishers choose to identify *My Struggle*. However, Lejeune also stipulates 'the *author*, the *narrator*, and the *protagonist* must be identical' and I think passages such as Knausgaard's description of pushing a buggy open up the possibility that author and protagonist-narrator are different (1986, p.5).

Texts where the autobiographical pact is obeyed and yet which are presented as fiction allow for increasing hybridity and the result is a shifting, fluid relationship between writer, narrator and character which means that previous definitions of autobiography are less valid and new categories such as ‘autofiction’ have evolved.

Johnnie Gratton’s definition of autofiction in the *Encyclopedia of Life Writing* describes it as ‘one of the forms taken by autobiographical writing at a time of severely diminished faith in the power of memory and language to access definitive truths about the past or the self’ (2001, p.86). The French writer and critic Serge Doubrovsky is credited with the invention of autofiction and Rachel Cusk and Sheila Heti are two writers alongside Knausgaard whose work has been associated with the term. All three authors are engaged in very different projects and in a 2017 article for *The Cut* Heidi Julavits quotes Cusk’s comment that Heti ‘uses herself, her Sheila-ness, much, much, much more than I do.’ Julavits notes that while Cusk does not use her ‘Cuskness’ she nonetheless makes use of a narrator ‘that does not by accident resemble her’ (Julavits, 2017). In section 3, ‘Writing and Disappearing’, I argue that this resemblance is itself a form of disguise.

In a paper on autobiography and autofiction at the 2014 International Autobiography conference, Karen Ferreira-Meyers offered the following translation of a passage by Doubrovsky, in which the narrator, Serge Doubrovsky, imagines that the dreams he writes down in his notebook become the subject of a book he would write at the wheel of his car:

I write a TEXT AS A MIRROR a TEXT IN REFLECTIONS if I write the scene I live I see it is there it is strong sitting there on literally it is true it is literally true it is copied live I write it falls straight the scene seems to be repeating the same scene directly

experienced as REAL not a doubt it is certain I sit there on the seat back of the hand on the wheel enough that I put the beige notebook between my fingers book of dreams built in dreams I volatilize I am there it is real if I write in my car my autobiography will be my AUTO-FICTION (Ferreira-Meyers, 2014).

In the first draft of my novel *The Weaning* I wrote a passage in homage to the playfulness of this originating story:

I am driving and have to slow down for a mother crossing with two small children in tow. Let's start again - it's hard enough (not to mention illegal) to text while driving so how am I writing whilst in command of a vehicle (a tank of a car – a Peugeot estate, the well of its passenger seat littered with cardboard coffee cups and drinks cans)? The truth is, I'm not driving, I'm writing. The truth – we'll come to that. The truth is that I am writing this. Here. Now. My hands are on the keyboard, hovering over the 'I' key (stained through heavy use) and now the 'k' key. Now the 'I' once more. I.

I am wearing purple knitted arm socks, the cuffs of which are trimmed with pink. There are threads of glitter among the fibres of the pink wool and small bows - pink velvet - on the back of each hand.

My laptop is ancient. In order to best describe it for you, I sat back in my chair (pine, one of a set of four that used to belong to my mother, I am seated at a pine kitchen table that also belonged to her. It has a drawer for cutlery but knives and forks rarely make their way to their designated home, instead remaining stored in the dishwasher). The laptop is black and heavy with an unfamiliar logo on its casing (unfamiliar to who? Not me. It is mine and I use it every day, therefore its logo is as familiar as my own face). The keyboard is filthy with the 'I' key especially stained. As I sat back in my chair to describe it, I thought I saw blood. Viscous plasma pooling sinisterly underneath my computer. I almost (not quite) gave a gasp but realised in the same instant that it wasn't blood at all but a dark knot in the wood of the kitchen table (pine, used to belong to my mother, but you know this already).

I am typing on my ancient laptop, I am words on the page. That present tense of earlier, though, it brought you a sense of immediacy, hopefully - did it? That was my intention. Before you were rudely interrupted, hopefully you were there, in the car alongside me, ankle-deep in the rubbish on the passenger's side. That mother was crossing the road with her two small children. How 'small' were they? Are we talking two years old or six? There's a difference. I should know, I'm a childminder, and a mother, which you may have inferred from the mention of a dishwasher and those four dining chairs.

These children crossing the road, though, and their mother, who are they? What are they wearing? Michael Finnegan begin again.

I am driving (I'm not, I'm writing, but you know that, move along there's nothing to see here) and I have to slow down. I am driving and have to slow down for a mother crossing with two small children in tow. One of the kids is wearing a superhero costume. Here we are, now we're cooking with gas. No we're not, we're writing. No we're not, we're driving. The sun is setting. The mother and her children are crossing the road.

As is evident from the passage above, in my bid to be as faithful to the 'truth' of my experience as a childminder as possible in the creative part of my research, I soon discovered that words become an obstacle between my lived experience and the written version of this experience. It was my intention to write a readable novel and this affected my creative decision to eradicate such musings from the evolving text. These decisions in turn impacted on my choice of form. The central character in my novel is a childminder and bears some relation to the Victorian governess figure, in that she remains outside the family, is of a lower social order to the families she works for and is an object of pity and/or condescension for the reader and for her employers. While writers like Cusk and Heti, who are established in their field, seek to escape the confines of previous literary form, my chosen structure for *The Weaning* intentionally borrows from the suspense thriller, a conventional form in which I house my experiments with writing the self and explore ideas about writing and self-reflexivity.

These experiments focus on the materiality of writing, which is something that occurs in many contemporary works by writers interested in representing the self, including J.M Coetzee, who is another writer interested in both the novel form as well as autobiography. His novel *The Childhood of Jesus* in a kind of detention centre in a town called Novilla (novel/Novilla), where the characters are refugees. 'We have been given a chance to live' says one of them 'But do we

have to live here?’ asks another. ‘Here as opposed to where?’ comes the reply. ‘There is nowhere else to be but here’ (2013, p.17). During my research I grew aware of a similar focus on textuality in the work of other writers including Cusk and Ferrante, whose novels are filled with images of doubling, which can be interpreted as a way of describing the process of storying the self. These writers work hard to separate the writing self from the written version, as does Deborah Levy, whose 2016 novel *Hot Milk* begins with a smashed laptop. Becoming aware of this patterning in the work of other writers, I made a conscious effort to insert such imagery into my own writing. This is one way in which I enter a dialogue with them.

Returning briefly to consider a literary tradition which predates notions of autofiction and yet informs this trend and includes imagery of the sort detected in these recent works, Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s 1892 short story *The Yellow Wallpaper* is of interest. In the story, a female writer-narrator is incarcerated on the orders of her doctor husband and physician brother in the nursery at the top of the house. Perkins Gilman’s protagonist has a room of her own but she also has a husband who hates to have her write a word (2016, p.14). The nursery in which she stays not only infantilises her, it imprisons her. The journey of the narrative is the journey of the female narrator to a kind of personal and creative freedom which shocks and appals her husband. By joining the distorted figures she sees in the wallpaper, Perkins-Gilman’s protagonist anticipates Virginia Woolf’s vision of women breaking away from ‘the sentence made by men [...] too loose, too heavy, too pompous for a woman’s use’ (1979, p.48). Perkins-Gilman renders her narrator’s husband unconscious at the end of her story. In doing so, she demonstrates that a woman writer must make her own sentence, altering and adapting the male sentence until she writes one that suits the natural shape of her thought. In doing so she acknowledges that the feminine shape, like Perkins-Gilman’s wallpaper women, is a distortion only if it is the

masculine shape we are measuring ourselves against. (Wolff, 1990, p.52). Similarly, our writing is only ‘polluted’ if we consider it belonging or not belonging to a male dominated literary canon. In order not to view ourselves as contorted we need to shed the male measure – not a countercanon, then, and not a separatist canon, either, since it would be reductive to write only in ‘the area reserved for the female sex’ Elena Ferrante mentions, in which women writers ‘must only address certain themes and in certain tones that the male tradition considers suitable for the female gender’ (Schappell, 2015). An alternative canon could exist not in isolation, nor solely in relation to an existing canon chosen and approved of by men (‘It is fairly common, for example, to explain the literary work of women writers in terms of some variety of dependence on literature written by males’ (Schappell, 2015). The canon I propose exists alongside the one we have inherited, it would be a canon of our own. Such a canon requires no rupture, nothing of the violence of the ending to Perkins-Gilman’s short story is required, in which a door breaks under an axe. What is necessary is simply an acknowledgement that women are able to express themselves as they want to express themselves and crucially, that they are witnessed doing so. I discuss the importance of witnessing later in this essay. In borrowing Perkins-Gilman’s final image for my own novel’s ending, I acknowledge this demand of hers and I am her witness.

Charlotte Bronte’s novels *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Villette* (1853) would earn their place in this alternative canon and can be seen as a form of self-fashioning or self-representation as well as being texts which reveal ‘a woman’s presence’ and what’s more a woman ‘resenting the treatment of her sex and pleading for its rights’ (Woolf 1979, p.47). Nancy K. Miller refers to *Jane Eyre* as a ‘fictional autobiography’ and presumably Bronte drew on her own experience as a governess to create her protagonists (1991, p.130). If this seems reductive in providing an

overly biographic interpretation of these works, and falling into a trap that Anderson observes, that ‘women’s texts will always be read as autobiographic whatever their putative genre’, these texts can certainly be considered Bildungsroman (1997, p.115). This categorisation relates them back to the earliest autobiographies by Augustine and Julian, whose works took religious conversion or trauma as their focus and in this respect might be read as stories of becoming.

In thinking about Jane Eyre as Bronte’s proxy, I felt my way towards answering my research questions about what use a proxy could serve and who my proxy should be. Bronte’s protagonist is educated and literate and serves as a reflection of her educated and literate creator. This encouraged me to surface my own protagonist’s interest in words and writing. My project began as a self-portrait but ended up as a story about writing. This is hardly surprising - after all, I worked as a childminder but the recording of that work is via my work as a writer and it is the physical working relationship with words that was my experience while I was writing. As Virginia Woolf observes in *A sketch of the Past* whoever writes about ‘the past is much affected by the present moment’ (1976, p.75). My experience of the present moment guided me in answering the question prompted by Augustine’s issue with the whole self and what elements of my self to represent. The result is a collision of mother, childminder and writing self. In Woolf’s portrait of her father she alerts the reader to her taking on male literary habits and disrupting them. Janet Wolff’s book *Feminine Sentences* takes its title from her near-namesake’s idea that women writers might avail themselves of a ‘sentence of the feminine gender’ and she is quick to note the significance of the non-literary meaning of the word ‘sentence’, pointing as it does to ideas about the ‘constraints and restrictions experienced by women in a patriarchal culture’ (1990 p. 9 & p.10). The ending to my novel, in which my protagonist is incarcerated in ‘a room

of her own', is intended as a nod to this idea; the action of my novel occurs in a sphere hitherto reserved for the female and as in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's story, the home becomes a site for female mental disorder. Women in society are inhibited by unhelpful associations between femininity and domestic life and women writers can be seen to be similarly entrapped, in the resistance towards viewing their work as the product of imagination and experiment.

In early drafts of my novel, I was guided by Jeanette Winterson's rallying cry, 'Why shouldn't a woman be her own experiment?':

If I call myself Jeanette why must I be writing an autobiography? Henry Miller calls his hero Henry. Paul Auster and Milan Kundera call themselves by name in some of their work. So does Philip Roth. This is understood by critics as playful meta-fiction. For a woman it is assumed to be confessional. Is this assumption about gender? Something to do with creative authority? (Winterson, 1991, p.xiv)

Encouraged by Winterson, I gave my childminder character the name Hannah and evolved her into hannaH but early readers reacted against the backward spelling of my own name and certainly it stood out from the more conventional tropes of the evolving novel. Perhaps these early readers would not have responded in the same way to a male writer naming his protagonist after himself and spelling his name backwards but even so, I accepted the criticism and re-named my narrator Bobbi, a derivative form of Robert, the name of the male writer who employs her and exploits her. Bobbi represents those women whose caring responsibilities make it possible for others to progress in a world extending beyond the domestic sphere. Hopefully, her story contributes to the growing canon of literary works providing resistance to the 'patriarchal belief that motherhood is trivial' (Manguso 2015).

Literary Weaning

During this period of creative and critical research I considered ways in which what happens to a writer and her book find equivalence in the weaning process and I developed a concept of literary weaning. This idea has enhanced my understanding of my own creative process and my appreciation of literary works by others. My concept relates to the relationship between any writer and their text, regardless of whether they are a real-world mother or not. I have chosen to study works by women writers for the reasons stated but it is possible to view the separation between male writers and their literary works in these terms also.

In her 1936 essay on weaning in *Love, Guilt and Reparation and other works 1921-1945*, Melanie Klein writes ‘the mother must realize the baby is not actually her possession [...] she must not tie him too much to herself’ (1975, p.300). This could also describe what happens to a book once it is written and released into the world. I subscribe to Barthes’s view that ‘the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author’ and that ‘a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination’ (1977a, p.148). Relinquishing one’s authority over one’s book and handing this over to a reader signifies not only the death of the author but the death of the book as the author perceives it because it invariably takes on different meaning/s according to who is reading it. Relinquishing control of a text and accepting that readers bring their own understanding to characters and events the writer has created informs the ending of *The Weaning*. The action Bobbi takes in the novel’s finale serves the book’s suspense narrative as a fitting climax, but it also serves my understanding of what happens to a book once it is written and released into the world.

The basis of Melanie Klein's work considers the baby in relationship to another person or part of that person, typically its mother and her breast. Klein describes the object world of the child in the first two or three months of its life as parts or portions of the real world which the child needs to assemble as a whole. The child begins to see its mother and others as whole people and their realistic perception grows as the child makes connections between the face looking down and the hands that caress, the breast that satisfies. Klein writes about the child's growing power to perceive 'wholes' spreading to the external world beyond the mother as follows; 'the child mentally takes into himself – introjects – the outside world as far as he can perceive it' (1975, p.294). This perfectly describes the process of writing fiction and in this way a writer can be viewed as a child-like figure, as much as they are the parent of their book. Klein affirms this idea in a later essay *Mourning and its Relation to Manic-Depressive States* (1940) when she writes 'the baby, having incorporated his parents, feels them to be live people inside his body in the concrete way in which deep unconscious phantasies are experienced.' (1975, p.345). This is how it felt to create my narrator character and live with her during my creative research. While I was writing *The Weaning* I was a mother figure incubating my child-text and I was also Klein's child, creating characters whom I felt to be live people inside my body, assembling parts of the world in order to make sense of them as a whole.

In Linda Anderson's analysis of Augustine's *Confessions* Anderson points out the fact that the narrator's religious conversions occur within the context of a children's game and that the account moves from a childlike voice 'hearkening back to a world of frivolity and play' into one belonging to a 'higher realm of meaning' (2001, p. 22). Anderson mentions Derrida's observation that Augustine wrote his confessions after the death of his mother 'and, like Derrida himself, could be said to be writing *for* his mother' (2001, p. 25). She points out that this 'for'

could indicate the writer writing in his mother's place and suggests that *Confessions* mark the end of Augustine's mother's life and the start of his 'spiritual and autobiographical authority' (2001, p. 26). By contrast, in the texts by female writers which I analyse as part of my critical research, these women author themselves, the female voice retains control - and is intensely playful.

'Play technique' which recognises the significance of fantasy for a child is central to Klein's method of analysis (1986, p.18). Her approach involved items to interest the child ('the brick, the little figure, the car') which have symbolic resonance 'bound up with his phantasies, wishes and experiences' (1986, p.51). A distinguishing feature of any artist is their playfulness and this is certainly true of authors writing on the borders of autobiography and fiction. The brick and the toy car are symbolic objects with which the writer renders the world of their novel meaningful as well as realistic and concrete. The 'little figure' can be interpreted as the writer's proxy.

Given that the writer is in a position of authority (sic) in relation to the reader, they can be viewed not only as parent to the text and playful child but a parent figure in relation to the reader, too. Klein splits the mother into 'internal mother' and 'external mother' and writes 'in the child's mind, the 'internal' mother is bound up with the 'external' one, of whom she is a 'double' (1986, p.148). Applying this theory to the reading experience can explain why so many readers are eager to find parallels in the characters they are reading about and the lives of the writers who created them.

If the reader is the writer's child, willing a connection between the writer-mother and her work, then the writer's book can be viewed as a kind of surrogate. Barthes compares words with

‘those pillow corners and pieces of the sheet which the child stubbornly sucks’ (1977b, p.130), an analogy which takes on added significance if one takes into account the disappointment Klein observes in a baby ‘when in sucking he does not receive the desired milk’ (1975, p.298). Again, this might go some way towards explaining why readers are keen to make connections between a writer’s work and their lived experience – such connections satisfy our most basic desires.

In her essay, Klein mentions the old English meaning of the word weaning, which was used not only in the sense of ‘weaning from’ but also of ‘weaning to’ (1975, p.304). This is helpful in understanding the creative process by which I converted my lived experience and memory to a written account and has some resonance too, with Irigaray’s ideas concerning sexuate difference. I discuss Irigaray’s ideas about creative writing, authenticity and empathy in the next section of this essay.

Klein’s ‘weaning to’ not only describes the procreative aspect of the writing process (producing a book) but can also refer to the way in which writing a book enables the writer to wean themselves back to living a real life instead of inhabiting a fictive universe. Certainly, this was my experience as a result of this research and of course, completing one book also provides a writer with the opportunity to wean themselves ‘to’ their next piece of writing.

The Writer and her Proxy

By way of answering my research questions concerning the helpfulness of weaning as a metaphor and the use a writer might make of a ‘little figure’ like the one Klein identifies, this

section examines characters who can be interpreted as surrogates for the writer in the work of Rachel Cusk, Elena Ferrante, Sheila Heti and Jhumpa Lahiri. I discuss ways in which these characters are bound up with the experience of being a writer and I consider the ways in which writer and reader interact with these proxies.

At the beginning of an interview with Rachel Cusk for a 2018 podcast, Sheila Heti asks Cusk why the traditional novel form proved inadequate for her purposes in representing female experience (Heti, 2018a). In her answer, Cusk mentions the ‘moral, psychological and artistic problem of stepping outside the self for the reader’ which results in a loss of ‘the relationship to the truth of your own experiences’ and she claims ‘the female experience needed to be directly owned, it needed to be an autobiographical ‘I’ (Heti, 2018).

This autobiographic ‘I’ that Cusk talks about needn’t appear in a straightforwardly autobiographic work, however. Rousseau’s *Confessions* are considered the first modern autobiography because of the ‘revolutionary ideas about the self’ his work displays, one of which is ‘to identify so passionately and successfully with a new role as to transform oneself, at least for a time, into a different person’ (2000, p. vii). The solution Cusk found to the ‘artistic problem’ of stepping outside the self is an approach Heti’s work makes use of and is one Roland Barthes, taking his cue from psychoanalysis, from Bachelard and from Lacan, arrived at – a return ‘to the bed of the imaginary’ (1977b, p.95).

In imagining herself, the writer undergoes a process similar to the ‘projective identification’ Melanie Klein describes, in which ‘the ego projects its feelings into the object which it then identifies with, becoming like the object which it has already imaginatively filled with itself’ (1986, 20). In order to ‘own’ one’s experience and maintain a relationship with the

truth of that experience, a writer creates an object or a surrogate and the extent to which she 'imaginatively fills' this figure with herself is what constitutes her creative process.

In *Rootprints* Cixous writes about writing as a way of going 'further than myself because there is further-than-myself in myself – as there is in all beings' (1997, p.56). Creating a proxy enables this furthering since, as Cixous observes 'this further-than-myself in myself can only be a mixture of others and myself. Traces of others, the voices of my others' (1997, p.56). My own proxy, Bobbi enables me to go further than myself and into someone else, a composite who contains traces of me, traces of others as well as the voices of my others. One of these others is my writing self, my artistic self, a character who finds expression in Bobbi as nowhere else. It seems to me that this is the prime function of any proxy character – she enables the artist to explore her creative identity and to reveal this through the text and through the proxy itself. Bobbi allows me to express my artistic self and she facilitates my exploration of the ways in which this self is contained and construed socially

In *Free Woman* Lara Feigel refers to silence as 'the most honest response' to social uncertainty and puts her own uncertainty and irritation with her 'social persona' down to wanting to 'please, charm and reassure a proportion of the people I met by subtly metamorphosing into the woman they wished me to be' (2018, p. 217). Via her research into Doris Lessing and via Lessing's characters, Feigel comes to recognise and appreciate an inner self, an observer, a figure 'beyond social interaction, beyond duty, beyond sex - not even to be touched or tasted – exposed to loneliness as the necessary price of freedom' (2018, p.216). Herein lies a clue as to the advantages of a proxy – a proxy enables this remove to a safe distance where observing can take place.

Feigel notes that in Lessing's work this inner self, the observer 'was explicitly figured as a writer' (2018, p.216). The protagonists in all the works I study as part of this research are characters who are writers and while my character, Bobbi, isn't a writer, she becomes caught up in writing. Bobbi is not only a product of my observing and writing, she is expressive of my observing and writing self. I have also used her to express my childminding self and other aspects of my female experience – my role as a mother, for example, and my role as a lover.

Many of the writer-narrators in the texts I have studied are described as having professional lives as translators. In addition to texts by Cusk, Ferrante and Lahiri, books by Jeanette Winterson and Deborah Levy also feature central characters who work as translators. These figures signal the creative process by which the authors translate themselves and their experience - their 'phantasies' and 'wishes' - into text. More than this, these characters enact the split Klein theorises in the child's perception of its mother (1986, p.148). The writer can be configured as mother in relation to her child text and also in relation to the reader. In both cases the 'internal' mother is bound up with the 'external' one, of whom she is a double.

The writer's proxy serves as a means by which she observes herself and can be observed by others – by other characters and by the reader. In a discussion of Sheila Heti's short story *My Life is a Joke* for the *The New Yorker* fiction podcast, Ottessa Moshfegh comments that Heti's character 'wants to be witnessed witnessing her own witnessing' and she relates this witnessing not only to social media technologies but also to a conception of the universe: 'It started with a particle and the particle wanted to experience itself so it split into two particles' (Moshfegh, 2018). Given Heti's writing often features a central character named Sheila, it doesn't seem unreasonable to propose that this desire to be witnessed belongs to Heti as well as to her

character. This is not to ignore the importance of the imagination for Heti,, rather it is to acknowledge the significance of witnessing. In her book *Getting Personal*, which challenges the universality of a male autobiographical subject, Nancy K. Miller writes ‘feminist theory has always built out from the personal: the witnessing ‘I’ of subjective experience’ (1991, p.14). While Heti’s story and the other works under discussion here are not theoretical texts, they nonetheless offer a means by which to theorise female experience and the female experience of writing. Heti’s character in *My Life is a Joke* declares that the ‘best thing a person can win’ is to be seen and writing is one way in which any writer facilitates this seeing of themselves. In re-imagining my behaviour in certain roles and having a character enact these roles, I witness myself, and in producing a novel to be read by others, I am witnessed doing my own witnessing.

As a result of my research, I am witness to a dialogue between other women writers about their witnessing and being witnessed – a dialogue such as Cixous enjoyed with Stendhal. Sometimes this dialogue seems to include Cixous herself. For example, the final scene of Feigel’s 2018 *Free Woman* bears similarity to the much commented-upon final image of Rachel Cusk’s 2018 *Kudos*, the concluding novel in her trilogy, and both scenes seem to reference Cixous’s 1976 essay ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’.

In her essay, Cixous urges her female reader to

Write! and your self-seeking text will know itself better than flesh and blood, rising, insurrectionary dough kneading itself, with sonorous, perfumed ingredients, a lively combination of flying colors, leaves, and rivers plunging into the sea we feed. "Ah, there's her sea," he will say as he holds out to me a basin full of water from the little phallic mother from whom he's inseparable. (1976, p. 889/890).

This is an image which Cusk appears to reference at the end of the final book in her trilogy when her narrator swims in a sea while a man watches her:

Slowly he walked down towards the water's edge [...] his eyes fixed on mine. I looked back at him from my suspended distance [...] Then he grasped his thick penis and began to urinate into the water. The flow came out so abundantly that it made a fat, glittering jet, like a rope of gold he was casting into the sea. He looked at me with black eyes full of malevolent delight' (2018, p.232).

Cusk's character is unmoved, recalling Cixous's comments about 'the woman who still allows herself to be threatened by the big dick, who's still impressed by the commotion of the phallic stance, who still leads a loyal master to the beat of the drum: that's the woman of yesterday' (1976, p.891). Even if the reader is disconcerted by Cusk's powerful final tableau, Faye seems unaffected by the man's action, proving that she is very much a woman of today. More than this, though, there is a sense that Faye is her environment and her environment is her, which echoes Cixous:

our seas are what we make of them, full of fish or not, opaque or transparent, red or black, high or smooth, narrow or bankless; and we are ourselves sea, sand, coral, seaweed, beaches, tides, swimmers, children, waves (1976, p. 889/890).

In Feigel's book, the sea is identified as an image of freedom and the writer-narrator is attracted to the idea of swimming in the sea because she would be able to 'merge into the landscape, rather than just looking at it' (2018, p.297). In the final scene a man – an artist – holds

out a pink towel for the female narrator who is swimming in water that is too cold for him (2018, p.303). In *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, published the same year as Cixous's essay, Barthes mentions the harmful jellyfish known as Medusa, which he swam among, comparing this experience to immersion in the 'endoxal products of mass culture' (1977, p.122). Taking Barthes's metaphor of the sea as representative of mass culture, the defiantly urinating man in Cusk's final book of her trilogy can be interpreted as representative of the dominant male culture. His physical description matches that of an earlier male character encountered by Faye, a celebrated writer whose work has a 'tendency to eclipse' the work of the female translator who introduces him (2018, p.138): He is compared to 'one of the giant, pitted statues of Roman antiquity' and on the final page, to a 'deity' (2018, p.137 and p.232). Feigel's male artist can be seen as more anxious and rejecting of his culture, remaining outside the water while Feigel's female narrator braves the freezing temperature and dives in. There is a degree of optimism in both scenes – while Cusk's male artist could be seen to be trespassing on female territory by building a reputation for writing about domestic and family life (like Karl Ove Knausgaard, for example), he casts his 'rope of gold' into the sea as if Faye might grasp it and make use of it. His 'golden jet' adds to the water which bears her up, 'heaving, as if I lay on the breast of some sighing creature' and with this, Cusk replaces phallic male imagery with the maternal (2018, p.232). Feigel's character refuses to get out of the water, wanting nothing more than to 'dangle' (Feigel 2018, p.303). Feigel considers dangling as 'the opposite of striving' so this final image suggests a letting go, which the protagonist has been aiming towards (or striving for) throughout the book (2018, p.299). This new contentedness and this merging with the landscape can be read as the writer's confidence in an alternative canon, populated not only by Lessing, the subject of her book, but by other women writers, including Rachel Cusk, whose *Transit* she mentions

having read. Indeed, she mentions having read it on a plane - in transit herself, then, and a reminder to any reader familiar with Cusk's trilogy, of the opening scenes of *Outline* and *Kudos*.

Cixous's essay responds to Barthes 'death of the author' theory by urging women to birth a new, female voice. For Cixous, Cusk and Feigel the sea is representative of a male dominated culture in which women writers sink or swim (or dangle) while men stand complacently on the shore, sometimes urinating, sometimes helpfully holding out a towel. The collision of shared images in these texts – of swimming in front of men who stand on the shore, and of plane journeys, creates the dialogue Cixous aims for. Instead of entering into dialogue with the likes of Stendhal, however, these women writers are communicating with Cixous and via Cixous, with each other.

Viewing herself objectively through the intermediary of the other

In *Rootprints* Calle-Gruber perceives Cixous's relationship to other writers as a means of speaking about herself: 'you speak of yourself by way of the others [...], can only circumvent yourself, go around yourself with the irruption of the others.' (87). The presence of a proxy is hinted at in the idea that 'writing seems to take a double path: to the periphery of me by means of the others' (87). In this section I argue that the ways in which a writer interacts with her proxy indicate how she wishes this surrogate figure to be interpreted.

In conversation with Ottessa Moshfegh on the subject of Sheila Heti's story *My Life is a Joke*, *The New Yorker* fiction editor Deborah Treisman views Heti's story as concerned with 'a

failure of figurative language’ and perceives it as a warning against interpreting a writer’s material too literally (Moshfegh, 2018). In this way, the story functions as all the texts in this study function – as a caution to those who might be tempted to read the work as an accurate record of the writers’ lived experience. Heti warns against this interpretation by having her character speak from the dead: ‘When I received your invitation to come speak here tonight— Didn’t you know I had died?’ (Heti, 2015). In her story, the narrator’s corpse has been dug up from where it is buried, put on a plane and flown to the venue from where she makes her address, wheeled to a mike stand to make her utterance. The outrageousness of this conceit serves as adequate reminder to the reader that what we are reading is fiction, not autobiography. It’s as if, frustrated by the lack of attention paid to her capacity for imagination, Heti was driven to write a scenario so far fetched that no reader could mistake it for life writing.

Rachel Cusk’s practice also invites questions from readers about how far her characters’ experiences map onto her own. In relation to her trilogy, Cusk states that one of her aims was to ‘dismantle the apparatus of pretence – the process by which the author tries to convince the reader that they have not written the book’ (Power, 2018). Cusk views her narrator character’s role as ‘merely to draw a curtain over that whole transaction but acknowledges that one result of this is that she has to ‘own’ Faye’s persona. She seems to appreciate that this means readers will make certain connections ‘but that seemed preferable to the alternatives’ (Power 2018). The alternatives she refers to presumably relate to an inherited tradition of literature in which the writer behaves like an unseen puppet master. Instead of manipulating characters from the wings, the writers I have selected for this study reveal their artistry, in order to be seen whilst ensuring they are unseen to a degree, through their use of a proxy. This being seen occurs in the surfacing

of their writing technique and in an interest in the materiality of the text shared by all the works under consideration. The demand by these women writers to be witnessed writing can be interpreted as a reaction to the failure of figurative language that Treisman mentions as well as a response to female invisibility in the literary canon, in the books pages of newspapers and periodicals and in society.

In the past, Cusk has declared autobiography as ‘increasingly the only form in all the arts’ but the final chapter of her 2012 divorce memoir *Aftermath* marks the shift she made from autobiography to fiction by translating a scenario the reader has come to accept as autobiographic into a story narrated from a different point of view. In altering her narrative perspective from first person to third within the confines of an autobiographic work, Cusk surfaces the process by which a writer steps outside herself. She can be seen as aiming for what Suzanne Nalbantian describes as Gertrude Stein’s ambition with *The Autobiography of Alice B Toklas*, namely, to ‘view herself objectively through the intermediary of ‘the other’ (1997, p.20).

In *The Tradition of Women’s Autobiography* Jelinek comments that Gertrude Stein’s use of Alice B.Toklas as a third person narrator serves as a useful disguise because ‘camouflage was the only way she could write about her life’ (2003, p.198). Stein was writing under pressures determined by the historical moment in which she was writing and while the writers under examination here have perhaps less need for camouflage, writing is an exposing business and the disguise of fiction can be protective. Cusk’s final chapter in *Aftermath* boldly demonstrates her practice and paves the way for the novel trilogy which followed. It can be seen as a solution to certain problems associated with autobiographic writing, which Cusk experienced with the publication of her first autobiographic venture *A Life’s Work: On Being a Mother* in 2001.

A Life's Work described Cusk's early experience of motherhood and received what journalist Kate Kellaway refers to as a 'violently mixed reception', earning Cusk the dubious description of 'the mother mums love to hate on mumsnet' (Kellaway, 2014). In Heti's 2018 podcast interview with Cusk, she introduces Cusk by mentioning this 'controversial memoir' and the 'alternately admiring and excoriating' reviews it received, describing *A Life's Work* as 'one of the most divisive feminist books of the last two decades' (Heti, 2018a). It's possible to view Cusk's bruising encounters with non-fiction as one reason for her eventual return to fiction – as a means of camouflage and as a way of avoiding having her work and her person discussed in certain ways. After *A Life's Work* she produced four novels but returned to non-fiction in 2009 with *The Last Supper: A Summer in Italy* and then in 2012 with *Aftermath*. Both books received an extreme response with one review of *Aftermath* winning 'Hatchet Job of the Year' (Long, 2012). Cusk later commented:

With *Aftermath* there was so much stuff in my own life that the divide [between life and the book] was completely breached, my marital arguments the subject of newspaper articles, criticisms of me in my personal life were being broadcast on Radio 4. (Kellaway, 2014)

The breach Cusk mentions had a satisfying intellectual and creative impact on her own work and on the work of other writers, resulting in an alertness to issues of authenticity and representation. In a 2017 interview with Caille Millner, Cusk declares she has 'never treated fiction as a veil or as a thing to hide behind' which indicates her willingness for her use of fictional techniques to be interrogated (Cusk and Millner, 2017). Her comment on 'other people's processes and how even though they constructed something that said "this isn't real,"

you know perhaps they smuggled their reality into this sort of imagined structure’ serves as an invitation to her own readers to consider which elements of reality may have been smuggled into her work (Cusk and Millner, 2017). Cusk thinks of memoir as ‘the thing that says “this is real,” even if it’s as constructed as a novel’, which does something for the reader that’s ‘very different from a novel’ and she reveals her motivation for ‘reexamin[ing] the novel as something that can be made to soften the concept of reality’, describing memoir as ‘an exhausting enterprise, and you’ll be criticized too much for it, and the criticism is personal even if the writing of it is not personal at all’ (Cusk and Millner, 2017). What Cusk finds as a result of her re-examination is ‘something halfway [...] between “I” and “Not I” and with this she moves towards her creation of a proxy figure (Cusk and Millner, 2017).

The most distinctive feature of Cusk’s narrator character in her subsequent novel trilogy is that we get to know so very little of her. Faye offers hardly any perspective of her own, instead reporting the opinions and perspectives of others. In the final novel *Kudos* Cusk reveals her awareness of the possible effect of this on her reader in the account given by Sophia - one of many translator figures cropping up in these texts – of her treatment of her child during her divorce. Sophia explains how she refused to express her opinion of the child’s father and as a result, their child can’t cope ‘when there was no side for him to be on; in other words, when there was no point of view’ (2018, p.135). If the reader can be configured as the writer’s child, Cusk seems to anticipate their uneasiness with her literary innovation. She justifies her creative choices a page later, again via Sophia’s story, when Sophia reports the reaction of her child after she delivers his breakfast in her oldest clothes and without showering or brushing her hair and putting on make-up: ‘Mama, you look so ugly. And I said yes, this is what I look like sometimes. At other times I wear make-up and nice clothes and I look pretty, but this is also what I am like. I

don't always please you, I said, but I am just as real this way as the other way' (2018, p.136).

With this, Cusk resolves for herself and for her reader, the uses of the novel form over autobiography in producing a representation of the self which is sufficiently 'real'.

For women writers in this study, a dismantling of the self has to occur before we can write ourselves because the selves we live with are constructed within the context of a male dominated society. In writing on the borders of existing literary forms and in rejecting or refashioning inherited literary traditions, the female author is able to articulate her experience more accurately. In Heti's podcast interview, Cusk comments that she has moved beyond gender, which can be seen in her fiction practice which dispenses with conventional plot and character and moves beyond recognisable form to establish one uniquely tailored to her artistic aims.

It is possible to see this dismantling in Heti's writing, too. Beginning *My Life as a Joke* with the death of the female narrator, Heti invokes Barthes but also Cixous. In *Rootprints* Cixous compares her own attitude to death with Derrida's: 'The relationship to death is fundamental. It's the cause. We live, we write starting from death. Both of us. But for me, death is past. It has already taken place. My own. It was at the beginning' (1997, p.82). I will discuss death in relation to writing in section 3 'Writing and Disappearing' but as for the way in which women writers escape a masculine frame that threatens to silence the female voice, Heti's story is noteworthy, beginning as it does with the narrator being told by a man she loved 'You are a joke, and your life is a joke' (Heti, 2015). The narrator's life collapses 'deep into itself' while her lover's phrase remains outside this collapsing, becoming 'a thing separate from me' (Heti, 2015). The narrator's death negates her but as with Cusk and Feigel, she exhibits defiance. She survives the violence of the man's words which 'cleaved' to her head and muscles and bones, survives

being mashed into metal, having her teeth pushed back into her throat, her chest ‘completely run over’ until she is ‘nothing but those words’ and is able to dig herself out from ‘under the ground, salt and soil and sweat and worms’, resurrecting herself to address her audience (Heti, 2015). This being nothing but words reminds the reader that words alone are what constitute the self which addresses them – much like Cixous’s ‘seas are what we make of them [...] and we are ourselves sea’. For women writers, a dismantling death of the self has to occur before we can write ourselves because the selves we live with are constructed within the context of a male dominated society. In writing on the borders of existing literary forms and in rejecting or refashioning inherited literary traditions, the female author is able to articulate her experience.

In her short story, Heti’s narrator is the chicken crossing the road and ‘the other side is death’ while in her book *Motherhood* the ‘other side’ might be life – the life of a child and another life, a different kind of life the writer-narrator imagines for herself. In the to and fro of her debate about whether or not to have a child, the narrator is an idiomatic chicken, running around headless. In this work, too, Heti provides a Cixousian echo. In ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’ Cixous asks

Where is the ebullient, infinite woman who, immersed as she was in her naivete, kept in the dark about herself, led into self-disdain by the great arm of parental-conjugal phallocentrism, hasn't been ashamed of her strength? Who, surprised and horrified by the fantastic tumult of her drives (for she was made to believe that a well-adjusted normal woman has a ... divine composure), hasn't accused herself of being a monster? Who, feeling a funny desire stirring inside her (to sing, to write, to dare to speak, in short, to bring out something new), hasn't thought she was sick? Well, her shameful sickness is that she resists death, that she makes trouble. (1976, p.876)

In *Motherhood* Heti makes an early statement that ‘There is something threatening about a woman who is not occupied with children. There is something at-loose-ends feeling about such a woman. What is she going to do instead? What sort of *trouble* will she make?’ (2015, p.32, my emphasis). In this book the two sides of the road represent motherhood and non-motherhood. The narrator debates her choice by flipping coins, a method inspired by the I Ching ‘but not the actual I Ching ‘which is something different’ (Heti 2018, no page number). The use of the I ching can be seen as a homage to Barthes who ‘one day, having nothing better to do’, consulted the I ching about his ‘undertaking’ (1977b, p.56). The undertaking he refers to is his writing about himself (‘I myself am my own symbol’). However, his ‘having nothing better to do’ betrays an ease and a complacency which women writers cannot afford. Heti responds to his sense of entitlement by availing herself of his methods in her own project of self-representation.

What Heti and other women writers offer in their writing is ‘something different’ to the existing male canon and this difference is associated with form. At the start of *Motherhood* Heti notes ‘In this book, all results from the flipping of coins results from the flipping of actual coins’ (2018, no page number). With this, she invites the reader to consider potential areas of crossover between autobiography and fiction: If the author wants her reader to know that actual coins have been flipped she clearly wants us to consider what else in the book might be ‘actual’. Herein lies one possible answer to my research question ‘when is a novel not a novel?’ Heti describes *Motherhood* as a novel but clearly there is something else going on in this work – and in Rachel Cusk’s recent novels, too, which employ few elements conventionally associated with fiction. In Suzanne Nalbantian’s 1997 book *Aesthetic Autobiography*, Nalbantian groups Proust, Joyce, Woolf and Nin, describing their work as ‘fictional autobiography’. Nalbantian’s description of this developing and ‘contaminated’ form, ‘a hybrid make-up’ adequately describes the texts I

have chosen to discuss (1997, p.17). Nalbantian theorises that the writers in her study ‘include in their fictional works a self-reflexive commentary on their very method so that the aesthetics within are clues to the interpretation of their work’ (1997, p. ix). Similarly, work by my selected authors yield rich readings if interpreted in this way.

In his review of Jessie Greengrass’s 2018 book *Sight* Jonathan Gibbs asks ‘Is it even a novel?’ and he identifies a ‘camp’ where certain books ‘bred in a state of critical innocence’ belong (Gibbs, 2018). I’m not convinced that Greengrass would appreciate being described as critically innocent of choices she made while writing her novel but Gibbs is applauding her ability to write beyond genre, outside of certain literary conventions, abandoning tenets belonging to the traditional novel - ‘character, event, description, ‘scenes’ and dramatic turning points. Very little of that is here’ (Gibbs, 2018). Cusk has similarly dispensed with such elements to arrive at a new kind of writing. The first novel she wrote after *Aftermath* marked the creation of the space she mentions, between ‘I and ‘Not I’. Kate Kellaway describes *Outline* as ‘semi autobiographical’ but Cusk doesn’t refer to it in this way (Kellaway, 2014). Indeed, Kellaway reports Cusk as saying that ‘she cannot be found in the new novel [...] yet she is there’, suggesting that the novel form allows the writer both disguise and the witnessing Moshfegh mentions (Kellaway, 2014). Near the beginning of *Outline*, Faye’s fellow plane passenger misuses the word ‘prolixity’ in a story he relates about moving out of the house he shared with his wife. His mistake pricks the reader’s attention and his confusion with the word ‘proximity’ invites us to consider his position next to the narrator, side by side as they journey together. This character relates how he and his wife believed ‘that life was only expansive, and broke the successive vessels in which you tried to contain it in its need to expand more’ (2014, p.14). Interestingly, Heti uses the word ‘vessel’ in *Motherhood*: ‘A baby’s right there, building up at

the back of my throat, a self that wants to come through me – not necessarily even my child – I don't even feel this child wants to be raised by me, only that I'm the vessel through which it must come' (2018, p.43). In Cusk's novel, the narrator's fellow passenger goes on to comment that 'his marriage had been authentic in a way that nothing ever had again', which could adequately describe Cusk's seesawing between forms, initially viewing autobiography as 'the only form' and then discovering it to be a vessel that breaks (2014, p.15). For Cusk if not Heti, who uses 'her Sheila-ness' more than Cusk, fiction proves more flexible, capable of expanding with the life it describes (Julavits, 2017).

Cusk's sequel to *Outline*, her 2016 novel *Transit*, begins with a promise to the narrator made by an astrologer that some kind of meaning will be delivered on a certain date. It seems no coincidence that when this date arrives the only incident that occurs is a conversation between the narrator and a builder she has employed to help her renovate a house. The connection between Augustine's use of building metaphor and Cusk's has already been noted and by the time we re-encounter Faye in *Transit* she is physically synonymous with a house she has bought, which is being dismantled around her. The builder finds a Polish version of a book she has written and asks to borrow it. This leads the narrator to a meditation on the experience of being translated:

I had watched her create her own version of what I had written. [...] I would feel her creation begin to supersede mine, not in the sense that she violated what I had written but that it was now living through her, not me. (2016a, p.179)

Sealing this conflation of ideas for the reader, Cusk has her narrator compare the shift of ownership that occurs during the process of translation to the builder's renovation: 'like a house, I said' (2016a, p.180). In *Outline* Cusk makes use of the building metaphor to signal to the reader that comparisons between her narrator and anything the reader might know of Cusk's own biography are inappropriate. Faye stays in an apartment opposite a café with people sitting outside, with 'a long side window giving onto the narrow pavement which was entirely obscured by a photograph of more people sitting outside at tables, so that a very convincing optical illusion was created.' (2014, p.50). The photographic mural acts as a caution from the writer to herself as much as a warning to the reader, reminding both of the distortion any written project is subject to once the writer achieves a certain degree of notoriety:

This photograph was the first thing you saw when you came out of Clelia's building. The people in it were slightly larger than life-size, and always, for a moment, exiting the apartment, they seemed terrifyingly real. The sight of them momentarily overpowered one's own sense of reality (2014, p.50)

In the middle of the apartment in which Faye stays there is a glazed terracotta statue of a woman wearing a 'primitive robe that had been painted white [...] the terracotta woman made reality seem, for a moment, smaller and deeper, more private and harder to articulate.' (2014, p.55). The name of the woman who owns the apartment evokes the Latin verb 'cluere' which carries associations of renown and reputation and being 'spoken of'.² Her apartment is on the top

² 'Clueo/Cluere: 1. 'be called, be named, be reputed/spoken of/said to be 2. Be reckoned as existing' (Latin Dictionary & Grammar Resources, n.d)

floor of the building and the strain of climbing up the stairs is described as ‘faintly stifling.’ (2014, p.51). On reaching it, Cusk’s narrator experiences a ‘feeling of having accessed a place of privacy’ (2014, p.51), which might be read as the author’s appreciation of the sanctuary offered by fictional form compared with the exposure associated with autobiographic practice. Cusk’s appreciation of the freedom of fiction compared with autobiography’s limitations is implied in the marble staircase leading up to the borrowed apartment which ‘ended here and there was nowhere further to go.’ (2014, p.51). Fiction permits ascent to a place in which the writer herself is not to be found because she has sufficiently disguised herself, as a glazed terracotta statue, perhaps.

In an article she wrote for *The New York Times magazine* in which she describes her experience of renovating a house, Cusk comments ‘everywhere I looked I now seemed to see a hidden part of myself that was publicly exposed’ (Cusk, 2016b). She describes feeling ‘threatened’ by the way in which aesthetic decisions she made privately are exposed and by the possibility that visitors could ‘defile’ the space. She might easily be describing the experience of publishing a book and the resulting exposure to readers and critics. This interpretation is supported by the way she reports encounters with visitors to whom she explains her plans for the building:

I would describe what was going to be done to it and what it would look like, as though creating a home out of mere words, and watch their faces brighten as the vision transferred itself from my head to theirs (Cusk, 2016b)

In the same article, Cusk's remembers houses she grew up in and her recollection reinforces this parallel between home and a certain vein of realist literature: 'these rooms were expressive works, attempts to perfect reality and hold it in an eternal moment' she says (Cusk, 2016b). Her comment about her mother, the creator of these rooms, seems significant in relation to the absence at the centre of the three books making up her trilogy: 'What they seemed to suggest was that she would never be happier than in the home she made for us, at the times when we weren't there' (Cusk, 2016b). In addition to the narrator's strangely absent presence in the trilogy, her children are also often elsewhere. The deeply personal and gendered connection Cusk makes between woman, home and literature reaches a conclusion when she writes 'Entering a house, I often feel that I am entering a woman's body' (Cusk, 2016b).

Transit is littered with indicators that Cusk seems to be rethinking her earlier advocacy of autobiography. On page 204, for example, the narrator's (un-named) dinner companion talks about 'the nameless sensation he held at his core, the thing he believed to be most himself' and describes the way he has been 'lately, drifting away from the moral framework to which he had adhered all his life [...]. What I had said about passivity had struck a chord with him, but in his case it had caused him to see reality as absurd' (2016a, p.204). What the narrator has said about passivity is that for a long time she believed

it was only through absolute passivity that you could learn to see what was really there. But my decision to create a disturbance by renovating my house had awoken a different reality, as though I had disturbed a beast sleeping in its lair. I had started to become, in effect, angry. I had started to desire power. (2016a, p.204)

The ‘different reality’ that Faye mentions helpfully identifies the space between fiction and autobiography in which Cusk and other writers in this study house themselves. This new space gives an author greater control than is possible in straightforward autobiographic practice or in more conventional novel writing. Faye’s desire for power echoes Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s 1913 explanatory essay ‘Why I Wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper*’ in which Perkins Gilman mentions the restorative nature of writing in ‘recovering some measure of power’ (2016, p.7). Cusk’s use of the novel form recovers her some measure of power compared with what autobiography can offer.

Creating fictional proxies provides the writer with a means of escape. In an article for *Literature Compass* in 2011 Cusk comments that a writer writes books ‘in part to be liberated from herself – to create an external version of herself from which she can disappear’ (Cusk, 2011). In her trilogy, the external version of herself Cusk creates shares biographical similarities with the author but her narrator, apparently so closely modelled on the writer herself, allows the author to disappear because she is primarily a vehicle by which we meet other characters. The other characters Faye encounters are often artists concerned with representation who allow Cusk to explore ideas around writing the self. In *Transit* for instance, Jane is a ‘professional photographer’. Her name brings to mind Cusk’s resistance to ‘the idea of making up John and Jane and having them do things’ (Kellaway, 2014). Like Cusk, Jane is a teacher³. While I want to avoid inspecting these works through an autobiographic lens, as Thurschwell notes, it’s not just critics who make ‘the wearily familiar collapse between a woman writer’s life and her work’ but also the writers themselves ‘through explicit moves on both of their parts – moves which

³ At the time she was creating ‘Faye’ and ‘Jane’ Cusk was a lecturer in Creative Writing at Kingston University, participating in a summer school organised by the faculty in Athens, like her narrator, Faye.

simultaneously fend off and invite this collapse' (Thurschwell, 2017). Heti, like Cusk, has discussed the awkwardness she feels in re-naming characters, though her solution to this problem is different from Cusk's, opting to keep her own name for her protagonists and retain the names of friends and family members for characters based on these people (Heti, 2018b). The invitation these writers extend to their reader to make certain connections between the life of the writer and her work provides one way of being witnessed. Cusk's character Jane considers her students 'parasitical' but since she has sought Faye out for tuition, placing herself in the position of student, Cusk invites the reader to consider Jane herself in this way too (2016a, p.131). When Faye asks Jane what interests her in a certain painter, she answers 'He's me' and 'I'm him', going on to explain 'there's actually no reason why people can't be repeated' and again, in this way the writer invites the reader to make certain associations between character and narrator, between narrator and author (2016a, p.134).

While Jane experiences her teaching as 'draining', the tenderness she feels for herself is described as 'self-love' and configured as a parent's love for a child:

'It was this feeling that often brought her to a position of clarity about her own life. She would start to give them less and herself more: by draining her, they created in her a new capacity for selfishness. As the course drew to a close she would often have started to care for herself differently, more tenderly, as if she were a child; she would begin to feel the first stirrings of self-love.' (2016a, p. 131)

Since Cusk's narrator is also a teacher we are encouraged to assume that she shares similar feelings. Images of children occur throughout the text in a precise and knowing way.

Given that Cusk's memoir described the fallout of a divorce, it is obvious that she might refer to the place her children occupied in the struggle but the role played by children and parents in these later works often extends to a metaphorical realm that can be interpreted as a description of the writing process. For example, the following passage from *Aftermath* draws a comparison between Cusk's role as mother and a writing self:

I remember, when my own children were born, when I first held them and fed them and talked to them, feeling a great awareness of this new, foreign aspect of myself that was in me and yet did not seem to be of me. It was as though I had suddenly acquired the ability to speak Russian [...] I felt inhabited by a second self, a twin whose jest it was – in the way of twins – to appear to be me while doing things that were alien to my own character. Yet this twin was not apparently malign: she was just asking for a degree of freedom, a temporary release from the strict protocol of identity. She wanted to act as a woman, a generic woman, but character is not generic. It is entirely and utterly specific. (2012, p.18)

Could the freedom that Cusk mentions be the liberation she refers to in her 2011 article for *Literature Compass*? In relation to her identity as a writer, it is significant that she views motherhood as a 'foreign aspect' of herself – the 'external version of herself' she mentioned in 2011, perhaps, and one specifically related to language. This comparison is also evident in Jhumpa Lahiri's 2016 experiment *In Other Words*.

Lahiri wrote *In Other Words* in Italian, even though she freely admits her own lack of expertise in the language: 'My Italian is still limited compared with my English' (2016, p. xiii). She considers this book her most 'intimate' and autobiographic work (2016, p.219). While it is written without a narrator character or persona, the notion of a proxy emerges early on in the

mention of ‘two-faced Janus. Two faces that look past and future at once. The ancient god of the threshold’ (2016, p.39). As much as Lahiri refers to a threshold or a boundary between two languages, Italian and English, her image summons ideas of an alternate self and invokes the domestic in a way that she goes on to develop more explicitly in her 2018 story ‘The Boundary’.

‘The Boundary’ is another recent example of a female writer viewing herself through the intermediary of another, fictional woman. In this story a female narrator observes a mother of two daughters who spends her days writing. While the narrator observes that this other woman ‘does what I do: she sweeps the floor, cooks, washes dishes’, there is a distance between them and the holidaying woman brings with her a sense of ‘foreign-ness’. The impression is that the two characters are separated by the titular ‘boundary’ (Lahiri, 2018). The story ends with Lahiri’s domestic, non-writing proxy tidying up after the writing woman’s family and finding things ‘they’ve forgotten, or left on purpose’ which include ‘shopping lists in the faint, small script that the mother used, on other sheets of paper, to write all about us’ (Lahiri, 2018). This is the moment when the Russian doll-like structure of the narrative unpacks itself, and swiftly re-assembles under the gaze of the reader. As with Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s story, writer, narrator and the narrator’s own proxy or mirror image coincide in the physical environment of the story.

In *Kudos* Cusk has a woman writer character mention that she avoids housework ‘because those kinds of chores made her feel so unimportant that she wouldn’t have been able to write anything afterwards’ (2018, p.51). For Lahiri, it is evident that the boundary separating a sweeping, cooking, cleaning self and her artistic, writing self can be linguistic. ‘The Boundary’ concludes with a note that it has been translated from the original Italian by the author and she

explores this same linguistic border in her 2016 book *In Other Words*, justifying her experiment with language and writing through the imagery of motherhood: ‘I want to protect my Italian, which I hold in my arms like a newborn’ (2016, p.117). Lahiri invokes the maternal relationship by comparing a book to a person, ‘imperfect, incomplete, during its entire creation. At the end of the gestation the person is born, then grows’ (2016, p.115). To learn a language, she writes, ‘to feel connected to it, you have to have a dialogue, however childlike’ (2016, p.25). The associations she makes between language and writer are configured as familial relations:

the language and I have been acquainted for only a short time. We don’t come from the same place, from the same family. We didn’t grow up with one another. This language is not in my blood, in my bones. (2016, p. 43)

In the passage in which she compares her dictionary to ‘a map and a compass’ Lahiri also compares it to ‘a kind of authoritative parent, without whom I can’t go out’ but by the following page the dictionary has devolved: ‘By now this small dictionary seems more like a brother than like a parent’ (2016, pp. 9 & 11). Even though the dictionary suffers a loss of authority, Lahiri nevertheless is careful to observe ‘this little book will always be bigger than I am’ (2016, p.11). Her relationship to language is fluid but by the end of the book she has reached adulthood, commenting ‘I no longer feel bound to restore a lost country to my parents’ (2016, p.221). She considers *In Other Words* ‘the first book I’ve written as an adult’ adding ‘but also, from the linguistic point of view, as a child’ (2016, p.221).

It is significant that even in Lahiri's text – a book that obeys Lejeune's autobiographic pact and apparently makes no use of proxy, there are multiple images of splitting and dividing of the writerly self and these divisions are often described in terms of the parent/child relationship. The act of creating a proxy is a procreative act and it involves turning the authorial voice into a spectacle. This notion of spectacle is one that Nancy K. Miller raises in her discussion of personal criticism in her book *Getting Personal* and Lahiri's book could be considered in these terms (1991, p.24). *In Other Words* is distinct from the works of fiction under discussion here, but demonstrates the same desire on the part of the writer to be witnessed. The idea of spectacle is significant in relation to women writers especially, I think, since many of us are taught as young girls not to show off, to be seen and not heard. Certainly, this was my experience. My solution is to show off in text and to do this via an alter ego. Through Bobbi I can act out and I can misbehave and, crucially, be witnessed doing so. The issue of procreation has resonance for Irigaray, who views man as 'the procreator' in *Speculum of the Other Woman* and considers sexual reproduction as 'referable to his 'activity' alone [...] Woman is nothing but the receptacle that passively receives his product [...] Herself held in receivership as a certified means of (re)production' (1985, p.18). However, by committing to writing in the first place, the woman writer is active not passive, and in creating a double or a proxy for herself she is the procreator. The writers in this study are not receptacles, they are creators of new literary forms which comprise an alternative literary canon.

Miller comments that by the risks of its writing, personal criticism embodies a pact, like the 'autobiographical pact' binding writer to reader in the fabulation of self-truth' (1991, p.24). In *In Other Words* Lahiri employs no plot or character so this fabulation is strong and the gap between 'I' and 'Not I' appears narrow but even so, the familial relations hinted at between her

and her book imply that a procreative act has occurred, followed by some kind of weaning. Or did the weaning occur before the procreative act? In Lahiri's case, her linguistic experiment makes this possible because she became independent of the language with which she was most familiar before she wrote the book. Her process highlights the way in which creating a proxy is not only a procreative act but also an act of weaning as the writer separates from her lived experience and creates a spectacle of herself, taking on the identity of her fictional other, the 'little figure' Klein mentions (1986, p.51).

Everything has to be read from the surface

In her article 'Representing others: gender and the subjects of autobiography' Miller comments that Augustine's position as a starting point for the entire canon of Western autobiography is problematic if readers are to view the death of his mother as its motivation (1994, p.15). In spite of Augustine reinstating his mother, Monica, at the end of his text, Miller points out that readers have insisted on suppressing her significance, placing the male autobiographic subject at the centre of the text instead of affording equal interest to the maternal figure. Miller is careful to point out that she is not claiming the mother as a universal subject, recognising that such a figure would be 'just as oppressive as her male counterpart' (1994, p.18). Rather, she argues that Augustine's work has been misread and emphasises that in the 'ur-text of the dominant tradition', the subject stands in relation to his mother (1994, p.11). One way of creating a countercanon of female writing is to bring the figure of the mother, as well as her representatives and her stand-ins, to the fore, which is why I place a mother who is also a childminder at the centre of my novel.

In the preface to *Women at Work: Interviews from the Paris Review*, Ottessa Moshfegh comments ‘Writing is a lonesome art. That’s why it requires another person in the room – like an interviewer – to bring her hours of labor to life’ (2017, p. viii). In the context, Moshfegh’s use of the birthing metaphor validates the interview as a literary form but her notion of a literary midwife can also be related to the idea of witnessing, which she mentions in relation to Sheila Heti’s short story *My Life is a Joke*. Writers such as Heti are perfectly capable of bringing their hours of labour to life unassisted but ‘another person in the room’ as witness is required if the process is to feel complete. The writers I have studied can be read as mothers to the characters they create but their characters can also be seen to fulfil the role of Moshfegh’s proposed midwife, bringing the writer’s labour to life, providing ‘another person’ and facilitating the act of witnessing by the reader. The proxies created as surrogates for the author, and who sometimes share their authors’ name, are witness to the writer herself and also provide the means by which readers and critics witness the writer. These figures are not mere stand-ins for their authors, their role is more artistically precise. We witness Heti and Cusk via their narrators, who act as translators of the authors’ experience.

A certain solipsism can be detected among the writers in this study, in spite of the Cixousian dialogue which connects them and which animates their works. Is there a sense in which women writers need to quietly get on with their labour, disguising themselves and their artistic practice in order to remain under the patriarchal radar? We have reason to be wary of canonical conditions which threaten to exclude or confine our practice and this caution manifests itself in a sub text that runs through all the texts I have looked at. In her *Study of Envy and Gratitude*, Melanie Klein relates male envy of the breast to creativity since she equates the breast with creativeness, ‘because the breast and the milk it gives is felt to be the source of life’ (1986,

p.219). This association between femininity and life could explain why there has been an eagerness to associate women's writing with their lived experience and why there has been a resistance to the idea that women writers can write experimentally. However, it is obvious that creativity is as much to do with experiment and newness as it is to do with life. By engaging in hidden conversations with one another we are able to react to restrictions placed upon us and work out our position in relation to a canon dominated by male tastes and concerns. We share our findings with each other via a coded language that relates to the female body and female experience. This is our tactic in creating a countercanon.

In *Speculum of the Other Woman* Luce Irigaray critiques the idea of 'becoming woman' as consisting mainly in 'recognizing and accepting her atrophied member' (1985, p.22). 'Of course, there are the breasts,' she writes, but points out how these are classed as 'secondary' and mentions 'perplexity' around breastfeeding (1985, p.23). She complains that in reproduction, 'woman, whose intervention in the work of engendering the child can hardly be questioned, becomes the anonymous worker' (1985, p.23). Surfacing our artistic practice is one way in which a woman writer can refuse anonymity. In my novel, I make associations between the physical aspect of writing and the female body in order to draw the reader's attention to the way in which female identity and female experience informs the text. For example, on page 113, Nikki wears a dress that is white like the page and her black hair and kohl eyeliner are reminiscent of writing on the page. On page 252 she wears a collar made from typewriter keys which spell out the title of her husband's book. Elsewhere, Kim's female baby wears a 'Daddy's Girl' slogan on her Babygro. It was important during the writing of the novel to bring female physicality into close proximity with words and written language and the physical aspects of literature such as book page, word, and I notice other writers making these connections.

The material properties of the text and its surface are significant for these writers because it is one way in which to signal its deeper layers and provides a means of asserting the writer's intervention in the engendering of their work, thus avoiding anonymity. Even Elena Ferrante, an author who writes under a pseudonym, states 'my books aren't written anonymously; they have a name on the cover, and have never needed anonymity' (2016, p. 244). While Ferrante is keen to discourage readings of her novels which might draw conclusions about the ways in which her lived experience does or doesn't coincide with her written narratives, she is nonetheless eager to announce herself as the artist responsible for the text. Avoiding being anonymous workers and instead being playful with ideas around anonymity and authorship, is one way in which writers like Ferrante contribute to a female countercanon.

Joan Didion has commented that 'novels are like paintings [...] Every stroke you put down you have to go with. Of course you can rewrite, but the original strokes are still there in the texture of the thing' (Didion, 2017). Returning to the novel after writing memoir, Cusk struggled with the 'prior knowledge' a novel assumes: 'you enter this world in which things are known by somebody, and yet it's supposed to look real. So where's this knowledge coming from?' (Cusk & Millner, 2017).⁴ Cusk's aim was 'to write a novel where there's no prior knowledge at all' and this creative decision provoked an evolution of form and a surfacing of the materiality of her practice because 'once you start writing thinking, "Nothing can be known in this text by the narrator"— everything has to be read from the surface' (Cusk & Millner, 2017). Sheila Heti has also spoken about this desire to write from a place uncontaminated with hindsight, as has Olivia Laing, who wrote and published her book *Crudo* deliberately swiftly, ostensibly in order to

⁴ I remember submitting a piece of prose for Cusk's feedback when she was teaching the MA at Kingston back in 2012. My piece described a cottage as the colour of a dappled horse and Cusk asked 'says who?'. It was a question I tried and failed to answer/understand and one which I only appreciate now, as a result of this project.

capture a particular political moment. Are these writers dissatisfied with the traditional novel form inherited from Victorian literature and literary forms associated with self representation which trace further back, to Augustine, or are they expressing an increasing impatience with a place and a political moment which feels inauthentic to them, which feels alien? Both. Laing is another writer who filters her own lived experience through a proxy figure and it's no coincidence she chooses to complicate this process by using the writer Kathy Acker as her proxy. Acker was a protest writer, a punk literary activist, a provocateur who placed herself outside of established social and literary norms. The writers in this study similarly position themselves beyond the existing canon. They acknowledge their literary inheritance and reject it in re-shaping it and re-purposing it. In addition, they comment on the existing literary and political moment as they perceive it, and it's clear they find it lacking.

Cusk's solution to the problem presented by the novel as a form is to write in concrete detail – that is, the detail is taken from 'everything that anybody could see if they were walking past' (Cusk & Millner, 2017). The privileging of the physical aspects of text in these works is an indicator of their writers' embodied female practice – embodied in the sense that these writers are sensitive to the physical proximity of writer and text, writer and reader, appreciative of bodies in alignment with one another and of the value of words on the page, acutely aware of their arrangement. These writers privilege the physical exchange that happens on the page. Not only does this reveal the rigorous, sensory experience of the creative process, it also locates the text as a space in which these writers are in control, compared to spaces outside the text – in society, say, where we are less able to assert ourselves in meaningful ways.

Elena Ferrante is a writer whose work explores ideas relating to femininity alongside ideas about writing and reading. She is also a writer who has to contend with debate around the proximity of her lived experience to events described in her novels, as if greater proximity between the two somehow legitimises her work⁵. In ‘Women who Write: Answers to questions from Sandra, Sandro and Eva’ in *Frantumaglia* Ferrante states that her narrator and namesake in the four Neapolitan novels intends to prevent her friend Lila from disappearing. In section 3 I will consider ways in which these writers and their proxies disappear inside their works and what this signifies but for now my focus is on the physical artefact of the book and its mechanisms – its pages, chapters, sentences, even its individual letters – and how these act as a means by which the writer ensures she is witnessed in the work she is doing. There is comfort in knowing we are witnessed and as Barthes observed, words can serve the function of a security blanket (1977b, p.130).

How does Ferrante’s Lenu ensure the witnessing of her childhood friendship? How does she prevent her friend from disappearing? By writing. She wants to fix everything she knows about her in a minutely detailed story, as if to convince her that ‘cancelling herself out is impossible’ (2016, p.286). When Cusk expresses the urge to to be liberated from herself she qualifies this by noting she only seeks to disappear from an ‘external version of herself’ (Cusk, 2011). In this way, both Ferrante and Cusk align their practice with Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s, whose wallpaper woman appears and disappears in accordance with the protagonist’s efforts to both escape herself and adequately represent herself in a physical world inhabited by her husband and other male figures of authority. While it might be freeing, why should women writers cancel themselves out and allow a male literary canon to dominate? The focus on text and

⁵ See Chee (2016), Gatti (2016), Kirchgassner (2016), Schwartz (2016) and O’Rourke (2014)

the female body in the work under discussion demonstrates a resistance among women writers to accept our marginalisation. In a passage meditating on writing as the desire to ‘want something to survive you’ in the final book of Ferrante’s Neapolitan quartet, Elena reports Lila’s complaint that ‘electronics seems so clean and yet it dirties, dirties tremendously, and it obliges you to leave traces of yourself everywhere as if you were shitting and peeing on yourself continuously’ (2015a, p.454 & 455). The bodily nature of Lila’s analogy is significant and this same conflation of writing and its physical impact on the female body is surfaced in a scene in which Elena shows her daughters the gift Lila has given her:

I told my daughters – in Lila’s presence: Imagine, I learned to write with a fountain pen, then moved on to a ballpoint pen, then the typewriter – and also an electric typewriter – and finally here I am, I tap on the keys and this miraculous writing appears. It’s absolutely beautiful, I’ll never go back, I’m finished with the pen, I’ll always write on the computer, come, touch the callus I have here on my index finger, feel how hard it is: I’ve always had it but now it will disappear (2015a, p.381)

The callus on Elena’s finger is ‘hard’, as the process of writing a quartet of novels must be hard, but soon it will disappear. By discussing her practice with her daughters, Elena passes on the female tradition, thus ensuring a female canon. It is significant that this exchange culminates in a moment of touch. It is significant, too, that she tells her daughters these things ‘in Lila’s presence’. Early on in their relationship and in the first of the novels, it is the materiality of writing which binds Elena to Lila - ‘I decided to leave the text in Lila’s handwriting [...] in order to keep the visible trace of her presence in my words’ (2014, p.301) and throughout the series there is emphasis on this materiality and mutuality until the fourth and final book, when Elena’s

success as a writer makes her feel ‘unburdened’: ‘Finally it was clear that what I wasn’t her, and vice versa. Her authority was no longer necessary to me, I had my own’ (2015a, p.260). The use of the word ‘authority’ draws us deeper into this description by Elena-the-writer’s-proxy, and inside it we find a description by Elena-the-writer of her relationship to Elena-the-narrator. It is only when Elena-the-narrator can be sure of her autonomy that she is willing to return to the neighbourhood. From my own experience of a creative writing practice I can attest that it is only once a character is able to fulfil the midwife/interviewer function that Ottessa Moshfegh writes about and becomes ‘another person in the room’ that the writer feels free to return to herself (2017, p. viii).

Interestingly, in spite of a condition Lila describes as ‘dissolving margins,’ the instances in which she experiences her dissolution are passages of extremely physical writing. This is because Lila represents female artistic endeavour, something which is bound up with the materiality of text and language. The sensation of ‘dissolving margins’ Lila suffers from give her the impression that ‘something absolutely material, which had been present around her and around everyone and everything forever, but imperceptible, was breaking down the outlines of persons and things and revealing itself’ (2014, pp.89-90). With this, Ferrante clearly signals Lila as a proxy for the writer alongside Elena/‘Lenu’/‘Lena’. She is paired with Elena, a witness to her growing up, to her becoming a writer. Elena admits that she is drawing on Lila ‘to give truth to my story’, which clearly describes the purpose any writer’s proxy serves (2015a, p. 271). Lila is described as ‘mired in the *lota*, the filth, of the neighbourhood’ and the multiplicity and similarity of the names by which both characters are known alerts the reader to their relationship to their inventor and to their interchangeability (2015a, p.57).

Lila's first episode of 'dissolving margins' in *My Brilliant Friend* is resonant with the image of black ink on white paper:

The thing was happening to her that I mentioned and that she later called dissolving margins. It was – she told me – as if, on the night of a full moon over the sea, the intense black mass of a storm advanced across the sky, swallowing every light, eroding the circumference of the moon's circle, and disfiguring the shining disk, reducing it to its true nature of rough insensate material (2014, p.176)

This passage moves directly into a description of how Lila 'imagined, she saw, she felt – as if it were true – her brother break' (2014, p.176). The choice of words elaborating on this breakage carry an echo of Cusk in the mention of Rino's own dissolving margins, his loss of features: 'the beloved outline' (2014, p.176). Again, the muscularity of the writing is striking:

There, amid violent explosions, in the cold, in the smoke that burned the nostrils and the strong odor of sulfur, something violated the organic structure of her brother, exercising over him a pressure so strong that it broke down his outlines and the matter expanded like a magma, showing her what he was truly made of' (2014, p.176)

Through Lila, Ferrante is able to articulate aspects of her own lived experience and she is also able to the unreliability of writing as a means of describing or representing lived experience. At the start of the first novel, Lila has disappeared and it is by remembering her and casting the action of the novels in flashback that Elena brings her to life. In *The Story of a New Name* Elena notes:

This is more or less what happened to me between the end of 1963 and the end of 1965. How easy it is to tell the story of myself without Lila: time quiets down and the important facts slide along the thread of the years like suitcases on a conveyor belt at an airport; you pick them up, put them on the page, and its done. (2015c, p. 336)

The phrase ‘more or less’ alerts the reader to the unreliable nature of the account we are reading and the fleeting, transient nature conveyed in the travel imagery further reminds us of the unstable, impermanent nature of written experience. At the end of *The Story of a New Name* Ferrante invites the reader to distrust the connections she makes between the material artefact of writing – Elena’s book – and the life or lives it describes:

Her life had overwhelmed me and it took days for me to restore clear outlines and depth to mine. What finally restored me to myself – but what myself? – was the proofs of the book: a hundred and thirty-nine pages, thick paper, the words of the notebook, fixed by my handwriting, which had become pleasantly alien thanks to the printed characters. (2015c, p. 467)

The question ‘but what myself?’ seems intended as a reminder of the subjectivity of any document intended to describe a life and there is emphasis on the artificial re-ordering and confining of ‘overwhelming’ experience in ‘thick paper’, in words that ‘fix’ (and thereby render un-life-like) and are ‘alien’.

In *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay* Ferrante reminds the reader of the constructed nature of any written portrait by having Elena muse on her relationship with Lila in the following terms:

We had maintained the bond between our two stories, but by subtraction. We had become abstract entities, so that now I could invent her for myself both as an expert in computers and as a determined and implacable urban guerrilla, while she, in all likelihood, could see me both as the stereotype of the successful intellectual and as a cultured and well-off woman, all children, books, and highbrow conversation with an academic husband. We both needed new depth, body (2015c, p. 315)

Elsewhere, in *The Story of the Lost Child* Elena refers to her work as ‘this extremely long chain of words’ and to Lila’s presence in the books as a means of ‘modify[ing] my text’ (2015c, p. 24). She attributes to Lila the ability ‘to purposely supply the missing links, to unhook others without letting it show, to say of me more than I want, more than I’m able to say’ and yet Lila is absent from the beginning – there is no-one then, Ferrante seems to suggest, to give the text authority (2015c, p. 24).

In *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay* Lila accuses Elena of using the words ‘true’ and ‘truthfully’ when she speaks and writes and asks ‘when do people ever speak *truthfully* [...] You know better than I that’s all a fraud’ (2015b, p. 317). Her protest provokes the reader into asking these same questions of Ferrante and by the end of the book we become aware that Ferrante is writing almost dangerously ‘truthfully’. For example, when Nino asks Elena about her writing, she tells him she is writing about ‘men who fabricate women’ and with his encouragement she progresses a project that seems to bear similarities with Ferrante’s quartet of novels:

I put them in order, taking the first as a sort of synthesis of the divine creative act, the second as a sort of more expansive account. I made up a lively story, without ever feeling imprudent [...] This thing is not, like the army of all that has been created, *other* than me, but is flesh of *my* flesh, bone of my bones. God produced it from me. He made me fertile with the breath of life and extracted it from *my* body. [...] In the word above all, in the word that names her, she derives from me. (2015b, pp. 361-363)

This speech is given to an Adam-type figure ('Ish') but the language and imagery is both is feminine and maternal. It is Ferrante's female proxy who writes this material at the behest of a man and Nino's encouragement of Elena can be viewed as him partially 'fabricating' her by making her into a writer. Real-world speculation about Ferrante's identity produced claims that the Neapolitan novels were authored by a man, which allows this passage to spiral into a kind of mise-en-abyme. Remaining inside the world of the novel, though, it is more fruitful to consider a passage that occurs only a few pages later, on page 372, in which sexual and Biblical imagery combine to result in the kind of ghostly absence that pervades the series: 'Men, dazed by pleasure, absent-mindedly sow their seed. Overcome by their orgasm, they fertilize us. They show up inside us and withdraw, leaving, concealed in our flesh, their ghost, like a lost object' (2015b, p. 372).

Lost objects occur throughout the Neapolitan novels and in Ferrante's short fiction too. The lost articles are often conventionally feminine items such as dolls or items of jewellery or clothing. Through these items the writer encourages her reader to ask what else might be missing or absent and the answer could lie in a description of a moment of violence in the first novel, during which Elena describes her impotence: 'We, instead, out in the cold, in the midst of that chaos, without that attention couldn't give ourselves meaning' (2014, p. 177). The men of the neighbourhood are fighting and Elena is helpless to stop them. Without agency, and in the face

of destructive male power, the narrator clings to her friend ('we were holding on to each other to get warm' – 2014, p.177). Is it too much to suggest that this aligning of oneself with another who might be considered a version of the self, an alternate, interchangeable self, is what all writers are doing? In the face of the stupefying, sickening and infuriating reality Roth mentions and as a response to social and economic collapse and ongoing global violence perpetrated by men, it is perhaps particularly what female writers are doing.

As much as Lila fears her own 'dissolving margins', it is the men around her who dissolve, evident in this passage from *The Story of a New Name*:

That people, even more than things, lost their boundaries and overflowed into shapelessness is what most frightened Lila [...] I learned only from her notebooks how much her wedding night had scarred her and how she feared the potential distortion of her husband's body, his disfigurement by the internal impulses of desire and rage or, on the contrary, of subtle plans, base acts. Especially at night she was afraid of waking up and finding him formless in the bed, transformed into excrescences that burst out because of too much fluid, the flesh melted and dripping, and with it everything around, the furniture, the entire apartment and she herself, his wife, broken, sucked into that stream polluted by living matter. (2015c, p.356)

While Lila is afraid of the distortion and disfigurement of her husband's body, there is an extent to which she also seems to wish this upon him, like a bad spell or an enchantment, by way of punishment, perhaps for his 'internal impulses of desire and rage' and for his 'base acts'. This desire of hers can be seen in the increasing confidence with which women writers disfigure and transform the flesh of male literary culture. The existing canon is viewed in bodily terms, growing excrescences which burst because of excess fluid. Women writers are inventing new

forms but risk being sucked into a polluted stream – can we survive? Can we thrive? It is significant that the first time Elena hears Lila describe her ‘dissolving margins’ it is in relation to a highly sexualised encounter, when Marcello drives his ‘fancy car’ onto the pavement. Ferrante implies that dominant male sexuality threatens the female self:

Gasping for breath, she cried out that the car’s boundaries were dissolving, the boundaries of Marcello, too, at the wheel were dissolving, the thing and the person were gushing out of themselves, mixing liquid metal and flesh. [...] She was still holding my hand, breathing hard. She said that the outlines of things and people were delicate, that they broke like cotton thread. She whispered that for her it had always been that way, an object lost its edges and poured into another, into a solution of heterogeneous materials, a merging and mixing. [...] she muttered that she mustn’t ever be distracted: if she became distracted real things, which with their violent, painful contortions, terrified her, would gain the upper hand over the unreal ones, which, with their physical and moral solidity, pacified her; she would be plunged into a sticky, jumbled reality and would never again be able to give sensations clear outlines. A tactile emotion would melt into a visual one, a visual one would melt into an olfactory one, ah, what is the real world, Lenu, nothing, nothing, nothing about which one can say conclusively: it’s like that. And so if she didn’t stay alert, if she didn’t pay attention to the boundaries, the waters would break through, a flood would rise, carrying everything off in clots of menstrual blood, in cancerous polyps, in bits of yellowish fiber. (2015c, p.175)

The merging and mixing which Lila fears has a transformative effect on the written text, which takes on an intensely female character in a paragraph that begins with Marcello arriving in his ‘fancy car’ and ends with a menstrual flood. Thus, even as the female perceives herself under threat, Ferrante reclaims the text as belonging to the female body in all its ‘shapeless banality’ and goriness. The writer is articulating anxiety about her project and about her ability to gain

artistic control over ‘real things’ and give sensations ‘clear outlines’ but she demonstrates faith in the ‘unreal’ world she has created, with its pacifying ‘physical and moral solidity’. Later in the book, Ferrante has Elena expressing anxiety over this very solidity believing that her book ‘really was bad, and this was because it was well organized, because it was written with obsessive care, because I hadn’t been able to imitate the disjointed, unaesthetic, illogical, shapeless banality of things’ (2015a, p.311). With this Ferrante acknowledges the limits of writing as a means of expressing life’s chaos but this lack of faith in representation highlights the text as the most important element because the text is the only solid entity. Boundaries between writer and book dissolve, delicate outlines break like cotton thread and the writer becomes her characters. The ‘real world’ gives way to a sensory, emotional one which ‘pacifies’ the writer, and with this word, Barthes’ image of the writer sucking stubbornly and contentedly at a pillow corner is evoked and she is partially weaned, thanks to the words she writes.

Authors like Cusk and Ferrante are intent on making sure their reader understands where the value of their material lies – in the words themselves. In ‘Art of Fiction’ for the Paris Review, Ferrante writes that the most urgent question for a writer might be ‘What experiences do I have as my material, what experiences do I feel able to narrate?’ then goes on to answer her own question with another: ‘But that’s not right. The more pressing question is, What is the word, what is the rhythm of the sentence, what tone best suits the things I know?’ (Ferrante, 2015d). She goes on to hint at the autonomous life that writing has:

The extraordinary thing about the written word is that by nature it can do without your presence and also, in many respects, without your intentions.

The voice is part of your body, it needs your presence. You speak, you have a dialogue, you correct, you give further explanations. Writing, on the other hand, only needs a reader. It doesn't need you. (Ferrante, 2015d)

Ferrante suggests that writing itself can serve as a proxy – a substitute for living – and certainly Bobbi in *The Weaning* comes to view it like this. Bobbi becomes obsessed with writing and is unable, or unwilling, to commit to a relationship with her neighbour because of her compulsion. There is a child-shaped hole in Bobbi's life and words rush to fill it. In doing so, the words take on an autonomous life and become an entity themselves, a surrogate child. Writing becomes a Barthesian comfort blanket for Bobbi, which reflects the way in which writing serves the author, too.

In Jhumpa Lahiri's *In Other Words* the author's experience of the autonomy of words and language is heightened because 'language is not only the tool but the subject' of the book (2016, p.221). Lahiri observes that 'writing in a different language means starting from zero. It comes from a void, and so every sentence seems to have emerged from nothingness' and words are intimately connected with the author's own existence: 'If I didn't write, if I didn't work with words, I wouldn't feel present on the earth' (2016, p.213 & p.87). If there is nothing to connect reader and writer apart from the words which form the text in the reader's hands it becomes clear why the materiality of text is so significant for writers interested in self-fashioning and why the threat of disappearance and erasure hangs over these books. The writer – and any proxy of hers – recedes as the book itself grows and takes form and eventually the writer *becomes* her book, just as Cixous's woman writer *is* her sea. Lahiri articulates this idea in her 2017 essay *The Clothing*

of *Books* when she states ‘the author is the book’ (2017, p.57). It is also apparent in the Walt Whitman quote she uses as an epigraph for that work:

Camrado! This is no book;
Who touches this, touches a man (Whitman in Lahiri, 2017)

In *The Weaning* I use the book Rob writes to alert the reader to what is happening between writer and character, writer and reader, reader and text. Bobbi handles the book in a bookshop scene and hears Rob read from it – the same passage describing his wife which the reader has read. The description of the book’s cover shows my reader that my proxy is holding the same book they hold in their hand. *The Weaning* is less experimental in form than works by Cusk and Heti, less explicitly concerned with language than Lahiri’s, and I haven’t sought Ferrante’s anonymity nor extended my project to a quartet but the same image system concerning writing and motherhood and the female body is at play and it operates in Deborah Levy’s 2016 novel *Hot Milk*, too.

In *Hot Milk* Levy makes frequent allusion to the materiality of writing and what this might signify for a female artist. While her use of these images is thematic rather than formal, and while her novel doesn’t invite questions relating to form in the way that Cusk and Heti’s books do, she is a writer who, like Cusk, Ferrante, Heti and Lahiri writes both fiction and non-fiction and she is concerned with making the female voice heard. The images holding *Hot Milk* together merits study alongside these other works because like those books, Levy’s makes use of

literary and textual metaphor as a means of surfacing the writer's experience and signalling the writer's concerns to the reader.

Levy's novel opens with a smashed laptop and in the same passage the narrator describes her mother's words as a mirror and confesses 'I have shape-shifted from thin to various other sizes all my life' (2016, p.66). Ostensibly, her words are a response to her mother's accusation that she is 'plump and idle' but Levy is also describing the drafting process that any writer undertakes and the morphing of a manuscript from thin to 'various other sizes'. The laptop after all, has been equated with the narrator from the novel's opening paragraph: 'My laptop has all my life in it and knows more about me than anyone else' (2016, p.1). Sofia's self-identification 'my father is Greek but I was born in Britain' is swiftly followed by a description of her laptop 'designed in America, made in China' (2016, p.18).

Levy's narrator's sister is described as 'without a mind' and it is the narrator's lover, Ingrid, who is responsible (2016, p.173). The revelation that this is the case occurs near an announcement that Ingrid is planning to learn to ride with an instructor called 'Leonardo', a name associated with artistic practice and representation. In this way, Ingrid might be interpreted as fulfilling the same role as Ferrante's Lila, representing artistic endeavour. Her culpability in robbing the narrator's sibling of her cognitive abilities echoes Lila's various acts of aggression and betrayal, so that these figures also represent the need for an artist to over-ride critical thinking practices in order to create effective prose fiction. This reflects my own experience of the tension that exists between creative and critical writing which must be delicately maintained. Writers need to maintain creative, instinctive ('without a mind') faculties alongside a critical awareness and these two modes exist side by side, like siblings or lovers, or like mother and

child. In order for the creative act to be successful and complete a weaning process has to occur, during which writer and proxy separate and the proxy takes on independent life.

The maternal image, conjured in Levy's title, flows through the book, 'coming in' in the statue of the Virgin del Rosaria and the breast-shaped clinic and carrying with it associations of whiteness which also reflect the whiteness of the page. Levy conflates female body and text and uses images of materiality to describe the relation between the two: A pen leaks in the makeshift bed Sofia sleeps in: 'the sheets and duvet are now stained with black ink' and the bed in question is located in the sanctuary of the coffee shop and is temporary and shared, much like a book (2016, p.23).

Levy's images of femininity and writing and the way in which she binds the two reflects a playfulness apparent in works by other writers under examination here and recalls Jeanette Winterson's rejection of the 'confessional' and her ambition for 'playful meta-fiction' (2014, p.xiv). The clues these writers leave for the reader can be considered as a kind of code by which we urge our readers to look beyond received ideas about literary representation and instead consider these texts as distinct spaces (or 'homes' as Winterson would have it – 2012, p.61) to be inhabited free from the constraints of either tradition or representation.

Finding ourselves in text

Cusk and Heti have made a virtue of experiment to arrive at new literary forms while writers such as Ferrante and Levy conceal their playfulness with more traditional narrative methods,

which enable a reader to lose themselves in the lives of fictional characters. To be clear, for a reader or a writer to ‘lose’ themselves in a book is figurative since as Heti notes, as both readers and writers we are capable of thought and not simply ‘lost in a morass’ (Zucker 2017). Above all, this research project has been a process of finding – a process in which reader finds writer, in which writer ‘finds’ her self. It was my ambition to create a proxy with whom a reader could identify and empathise so deeply they almost become her during the reading process. Modelling my proxy closely on my self meant I was inviting the reader to become me for the duration of the book. In this way, I aimed to dissolve margins between writer and character and writer and reader. Luce Irigaray positions herself firmly against such ambitions because she advocates the acknowledgement of difference and the maintaining of what she refers to as an ‘interval’ between oneself and an other (Irigaray, 2014).

When Irigaray spoke about ‘Ethical Gestures Toward the Other’ at the University of Sussex, I was struck by the ways in which her ideas about making a welcoming space in which to encounter an other can apply to creative writing practice (Irigaray, 2014). The silence Irigaray considers a prerequisite for such an encounter can be interpreted as the silence of the reading experience and a writer’s proxy can be interpreted as the embodiment of what Irigaray terms ‘self affection’. My narrator, Bobbi is the ‘something or someone’ that Irigaray describes taking place ‘in the most intimate core of my being’ and she provides a means of remaining ‘in touch’ with myself (2008, p.97 & 101). By facilitating my exchange with my reader, she is also a means by which I enact the ‘going outside oneself in order to go towards the other’ (2013, p.26).

The following description from Irigaray’s 2008 *Sharing the World* reflects my motivation for creating characters such as Bobbi and articulates my incentive for writing creatively:

There is, in me, someone who is longing for the other as a condition for the appropriation of a familiarity more familiar than that of the world already known, as a condition of for discovering an intimacy that I have not yet experienced. (Irigaray, p.97)

Irigaray's notion of the ecstasy of the between-us which she describes in *In the Beginning, She Was* could adequately describe the motivation of many of the writers under discussion here. However, while Irigaray wants to safeguard the relationship between different beings, the writers I have studied merge writer and character and delight in blending 'real world' and textual world. These writers acknowledge what Irigaray has observed: 'Words cannot show life more than it shows itself' and 'words never truly express the reality of things' but in their works, words become life and 'the appreciation of their truth is better revealed in the dialogue with the other' (2013, p.33 & p.47).

I had the opportunity to discuss my ideas about literary weaning with Irigaray at a postgraduate seminar hosted at Nottingham University in 2015. I put it to her that interrupting the reader's experience of the narrative of my novel with questions about the identity of the narrating 'I' was comparable to interrupting breastfeeding by withdrawing the breast and exclaiming to the child 'Look! Look what we're doing!' I was concerned about disrupting the illusion of reality I had been building. In response, Irigaray told me she placed no value on representation and she didn't believe in empathy since her concern was to maintain an awareness of difference between the self and an other. Irigaray misunderstands the creative process, though, since for the writer as well as the reader, whom the writer hopes will 'lose themselves' in their

book, the act of writing and reading is an act by which instead of losing themselves, writer and reader discover themselves and discover the difference between them. Even for a writer like Cusk, whose recent work makes little use of conventional character and narrative, this is the case. Part of a creative writer's process is to consider character, and for any writer creating a first person narrator, the issue of what kind of proxy this might be for the writer and what makes a good or useful proxy are the kinds of question a writer asks. In doing so, we observe the difference and the distance between ourselves and our proxies.

In the final book in Rachel Cusk's trilogy, a character describes the way her relationships with men lack the 'authenticity' of her relationship with her husband, a man who came close to killing her (2018, p.163). The character sees her own willingness to be killed as partly responsible for her husband's control over her but once she perceives him as indistinct from any other man she becomes indifferent to him and therefore protected: 'my husband could be the man to enter and [...] it would make no difference, because the woman he knew – the woman who had believed in his persona – was no longer there' (2018, p.163). This tallies with Cusk's comment that she cannot be found in her novels yet she is there (Kellaway 2014). It also reflects Cusk's shift away from autobiography – a form in which we might assume knowledge of a writer and 'believe' in their persona – towards a fictional proxy. The character in *Kudos* who is 'no longer there' is not even Faye, Cusk's barely present narrator, but a secondary character encountered by Faye. Another character writer-narrator Faye meets during the course of this final book is an interviewer who plans to treat her as one of her own characters 'with himself granted the power of narrator' (2018, p.142). Cusk alerts us to her practice by having the interviewer describe his approach as 'a novel idea' (2018, p.142). With these proxies and proxies-within-proxies, writers discover 'the power and pleasure of reliving events with their sting removed'

(Cusk, 2018, p.10). We create the other person in the room Moshfegh refers to, to act as witness to our experiences and bring these to life on the page. These characters correspond to Klein's 'little figure' and provide a means by which we find ourselves and find new literary forms. For a reader, the process is similar - questions about the extent to which a character might reflect the writer's concerns and represent their lived experience alert us to the difference and the distance between a writer and her proxy. Observing this difference and distance is crucial if we are to avoid interpreting women's writing as coextensive with their lives.

In an article on Lessing and Ferrante, Pamela Thurschwell mentions 'an old, by now perhaps almost critically exhausted, dichotomy between maternity and writing' (Thurschwell, 2017). Clearly, I don't want to offer a 'critically exhausted' analysis but neither do I want to ignore the proliferation of maternal imagery in work by women writers who demonstrate an interest in autobiography and auto-fiction. The pressures of motherhood compete with the pressures of a writing life and writers who are also mothers manage the apparently un-reconcilable demands of both activities by integrating one role and the other. It's no coincidence that Leila Slimani's recent novel as well as my own catastrophise the handing over of children to carers - our creative practice manifests our maternal guilt concerning our availability to our children while we tend our literary offspring.

In a 2017 article for *Granta* Rachel Cusk configures herself, a writer, as the child of a narrating mother and associates this relationship with historical pressures on women:

In marriage, the woman compensates for her lack of external power by commandeering the story. [...] She fills the silence, the mystery of her own acts and aims with a

structured account of life whose relationship to the truth might sometimes be described as voluntary. I am familiar with that account: I spent my childhood listening to it (Cusk, 2017)

Cusk the writer is simultaneously the receiver of her own mother's story and therefore aligned with the reader. She is both parent and child, writer and reader. Similarly, Elena Ferrante configures the writer as parent of the text but also the character who moves through the text (as the reader does), acting as her written proxy. Cusk explains the tendency towards narration with reference to historical pressures on women and Ferrante offers a similar perspective: Her protagonists experience the demands made on them as women, mothers and writers as divisive but while her proxy Elena articulates her struggle as a second wave feminist, in terms of image and theme in the writing itself, the dual roles of writer and mother cohere and writing is presented as a nurturing act. A conversation between Elena and Lila in the last of the Neapolitan series confirms this when Lila's role in Elena's life is expressed in terms that also describe the pregnant state:

If once I had hidden, even from myself, that spark she induced in me, now I was proud of it, I had even written about it somewhere. *I was I* and for that very reason I could make space for her in me and give her an enduring form. (2015a, p.371)

During the same conversation, Lila accuses Elena of adopting her mother's limp. 'You just needed a slight limp and now your mother stays quietly inside you' (2015a, p. 369). It's obvious that a writer might adopt a maternal role in relation to the characters she creates⁶ but interestingly, Ferrante's proxies alternate between the roles of mother and child, rendering these positions as interchangeable as Cusk's storytelling mother and listening child. Throughout the Neapolitan novels Lila is heavily associated with both Elena's writing life and her embodied existence as both child and mother.

Ferrante's proxy, Elena, is both mother and daughter and Ferrante makes explicit the way in which, in addition to Lila's daughter, Elena herself can be seen as the 'lost child' of the final book's title: 'I was moved by her clinging to me in order not to get lost, the way I, a small child, had clung to her hand. The frailer and more frightened she became, the prouder I was of keeping her alive' (2015a, p.148). In *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay* we see Elena as mother of her daughter and we are also shown this daughter of hers in role as mother when Elena witnesses her staging/re-enacting domestic violence in play: 'The new flesh was replicating the old in a game, we were a chain of shadows who had always been on the stage with the same burden of love, hatred, desire, and violence' (2015b, p. 291). The maternal image is used to point out the artifice and performativity necessary involved in the writing of a novel. As the narrative arc progresses over the four books, this duality is evident in the increasing back and forth exchange of power between characters so that by the time we reach the final book Elena's mother is dying 'while my stomach began to swell happily and in it grew a heart different from the one in my breast' (2015a, p.148).

⁶ Ferrante hints at the embodied nature of creative writing practice and the way in which a writer can confuse fact and fiction when she has Lila explaining to Elena how she was able to convince herself that Nino was the father of her baby and that by doing so 'for a few years Genarro was *truly* Nino's child' (2015a, p. 369)

In *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay* Lila counsels Elena on pregnancy – ‘This life of another, she said, clings to you in the womb first and then when it finally comes out, it takes you prisoner, keeps you on a leash, you’re no longer your own master. With great animation she sketched every phase of my maternity, tracing it over hers’ (2015b, p. 233). Lila’s behaviour – or the way her behaviour is interpreted by Elena in relation to the maternal is rarely straightforward – she is often described as insinuating herself or absenting herself and thereby complicating the relationship. During an episode in the first book, mythologies of womanhood are conflated with storytelling: Elena has started her period and is called upon to prove that her breasts are real, her bra not padded, while her friend Carmela elaborates on a local mystery and tells her ‘the daughter of the murderer was in love with the son of the victim [...] What a story!’ (2014, p.95). In the same episode the narrator refers to Lila acting on her ‘like a demanding ghost [...] I had made a place for her in me’ (2014, p. 97). Throughout the four novels Ferrante seems to urge the reader to make connections between womanhood, maternity and the role of the writer. She uses Lila’s slipperiness - or Elena’s perception of Lila’s slippery nature - to achieve this. When Elena is exhausted with the conflicting demands of writing and motherhood, the thought of asking Lila for help brings about a brief moment of what might be interpreted as post-partum psychosis as she disturbingly conflates her friend and her child: ‘part of me had the clear sensation that Lila was in the house already, present: if once she had been hiding inside me, now, with her narrow eyes, her furrowed brow, she had slipped into Dede’ (2015b, p. 244). Later, Elena describes her rivalry with Lila in terms that are reminiscent of a child’s struggle in relation to its parent:

Become. It was a verb that had always obsessed me, but I realized it for the first time only in that situation. *I wanted to become*, even though I had never known what. And I had

become, that was certain, but without an object without a real passion. Without a determined ambition. I had wanted to become something – here was the point - only because I was afraid that Lila would become someone and I would stay behind. *My becoming was a becoming in her wake*. I had to start again to *become*, but for myself, as an adult, outside of her (2015b, p.346)

When Elena refers to her writing as ‘a sort of synthesis of the divine creative act’ in *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay* and describes being ‘made fertile’ by God, Ferrante’s choice of language and imagery is feminine as well as divine and culminates ‘in the word above all, in the word that names her, she derives from me’ (2015b, p. 363). With this, Ferrante’s text turns in on itself: It is her female proxy who writes this material (described as a tract about ‘men who fabricate women’) at the behest of a man. Even as she divides and multiplies herself and ‘spread[s] her spirit over every flesh’, the writer and her proxy obliterates (or erases) herself and by the last book, Elena has conferred creative power to Lila: ‘I had been useless, I was useless. I was irritated and I thought: she treats me as if she wanted to fire me for a poor performance.’ (2015a, pp.363 & 385) This apparent reversal, combined with the possibility that Lila’s daughter was abducted in the mistaken belief that she is Elena’s and the parcel that arrives for Elena from the disappeared Lila which begins the quartet, suggest that we are to interpret the books we are reading as Lila’s work, not Elena’s. Perhaps this is a story of literary misappropriation? After all, Lila gave her daughter the name of Elena’s beloved doll so perhaps ‘doll’ is a code word and we are meant to understand that what the parcel contains is the manuscript Elena wishes for or ‘fantasises’ about – ‘it was a fantasy of mine’ (2015a, pp. 451 & 462):

I would have liked Lila to call me one day and say: I have a manuscript, a notebook, a *zibaldone*, in other words a text of mine that I'd like you to read and help me arrange. I would have read it immediately. I would have worked to give it a proper form, probably, passage by passage, I would have ended up rewriting it. (2015a, p.462)

The epilogue ('Restitution') to the whole novel series begins with an admission that Elena has reread her work 'not so much to improve the quality of the writing as to find out if there are even a few lines where it's possible to trace the evidence that Lila entered my text and decided to contribute to writing it' (2015a, p. 469). This acts as an invitation on Ferrante's part – by bringing her proxy and her reader into alignment through the act of reading and re-reading she invites us to 'trace the evidence' and interpret these books as her comment on the literary canon, with Lila representative of female creativity and Elena as the embodied female writer-artist who will disseminate the work.

Rachel Cusk makes a similar re-claiming of the canon in *Transit* when she refers to 'a literature of adoption' and when the narrator and her 'date', who is adopted, have a conversation about him trying on his father's clothes: 'His father had been much bigger and taller than him: wearing the clothes he felt that he was somehow re-enveloping himself in what had been good about his father' (2016, pp.203 & 201).

The father can be interpreted as symbolic of the literary canon and while it is the male companion of Cusk's narrator who tries on his clothes, it is significant that Faye listens to his account of this experience and reports it back to us, the reader, as she listens and reports back on the other experiences which make up the book. The writer is often positioned as child-like in this

work, while Faye's children themselves are absent. The photography teacher, Jane, who visits her is 'narrow bodied' with a bare, lined face 'like the face of a worried child' and the artist Jane admires is described as 'a tormented child imprisoned in a great rock of flesh' (2016a, pp. 128 & 141). Faye's friend Amanda has 'a youthful appearance on which the patina of age was clumsily applied, as if, rather than growing older, she had merely been carelessly handled, like a crumpled photograph of a child' and a fellow writer is 'big and fleshy and strangely childlike, like a giant boy' (2016a, pp. 163 & 86). If this diminution of adult artists playfully posits the writer's sense of her own position in relation to the canon, towards the end of *Outline* Cusk makes this apparent in having a character ('an editor at a publishing house' – 2014, p.181) describe her relationship with a man in the following terms:

she liked being beside him, liked the reflection of herself he gave her. And he was a man in possession of his own morality and attitudes, so that she felt – for the first time, as she had said – a kind of invisible boundary around him, a line it was clear, though no one ever said as much, she ought not to cross. (2014, p.192)

This relationship, with its clear yet invisible boundaries can be interpreted as a reference to ways in which women writers feel constrained, inhibited and excluded in a way their male counterparts are unlikely to understand.

Ferrante extends the commentary provided by Cusk's playfulness with child-like figures in her use of dolls throughout her work. Not only do these dolls serve as surrogates for the

female writer, they are also representative of the text as an artefact. In the Neapolitan novels, Ferrante hints that Lila is a character Elena has created, who exists only on the page. In this way Ferrante, Elena and Lila occur Russian doll-like, one inside the other, contained by the author, whoever she might be. In *The Story of a New Name* Elena refers to her relationship with Lila as ‘one in two, two in one’ (2015c, p.455). While Elena shares the author’s pseudonymous first name and can be aligned with the ‘active’ nature of writing, Lila is the object of the writing, a character conjured in words. In spite of the strength of her fierce personality and the agency she displays throughout the books, this means she is limited in her ability to determine her own fate, which is why she is never able to leave ‘the neighbourhood’ and why her only recourse is to disappear. From the start of the series it is made clear that Lila is a vehicle by which the writer explores the fictive universe – ‘would I know how to imagine those things without her?’ Elena asks. ‘Would I know how to give life to every object?’ (2014, p. 231). Lila is explicitly referred to as Elena’s creation: ‘the very nature of our relationship dictates that I can reach her only by passing through myself’ and occasionally it’s not clear who is who’s doubling who and which of the characters is the surrogate: ‘she and I continuously formed, deformed, reformed’ (2015a, p.25 & 2015c, p.456). By the fourth book, Elena admits ‘I want to seek on the page a balance between her and me that in life I couldn’t find even between myself and me’ (2015a, p.25). Mirroring the forming, deforming and reforming mentioned in the earlier volume, Lila’s job in Bruno’s factory is constantly changing and when Elena visits her she can’t find her. Eventually she is told ‘look where they’re stripping the meat off the carcasses’ - a suggestion from the writer, perhaps, that by this stage in the tetralogy Lila represents the writer stripped bare, the artistic self with no flesh on its bones (2015c, p.461). Lila is an artist who remains unfulfilled in terms of her lived experience as depicted in the novels and who by the end of the four books has

been ‘erased’ in a Barthesian sense. Ferrante has some fun with Elena’s search for Lila at the factory in this regard: Lila is not to be found ‘where they were stuffing skins’ and neither is she among the ‘sharp knives [...] the blades’ (2015c, p.462). This leads me to suspect that Ferrante shares the view Lahiri expresses when she ends her description of a book’s ‘gestation’ with the statement ‘I consider a book alive only during the writing. Afterward, at least for me, it dies’ (2016, p.115).

In Cusk’s and Ferrante’s texts the writers’ proxies waver on the fringes of being and un-being while the writers themselves remain secure, secreted inside these figures, announcing their presence through language and image. This is what I have tried to do in *The Weaning*. In terms of the canon we know our place – we are adopted children and like any good child (or revolutionary) we know to tread softly. An interview with Leila Slimani, author of *Lullaby*, provides a clue as to why we might invent proxies to speak for us: ‘As a mother you’re only allowed to write about the ‘good’ moments – not the ones when you’ve had enough’ (Walden, 2016). The complex shifting relationship between these writers and their creations reflects our conflicted status as women writers. Slimani comments that in art ‘women are either sensual creatures or maternal creatures gazing lovingly at their children. The woman who rejects both of these roles and is neither a mother nor a whore, doesn’t exist [...] we need to invent that woman’ (Walden, 2016). In this section, I have considered ways in which a handful of contemporary women writers make use of invented characters to reflect their experience of womanhood and of writing. I have explored their work through a metaphor of mother/child relations and specifically through a concept of literary weaning. I have viewed my own creative practice through this metaphor. In section 3 I extend the idea of weaning a child or a text or a reader to consider

instances of disappearance and non-existence occurring in these texts and speculate on what the resulting void might represent.

Writing and Disappearing

What happens to a proxy when the book is finished? Finished by its writer, finished by its reader. In this section I consider ways in which works by the selected authors confront issues of erasure. I address the writers' apparent absence in their written work and what this signifies. I use the metaphor of weaning to make sense of these disappearances. The end of this essay leads into Part Two of my thesis, which is comprised of my creative research and serves as a parallel investigation of the writer and her proxy and the ways in which a writer can both manifest herself - be witnessed, as Heti would have it - and simultaneously disappear in her writing. I argue that becoming invisible is conversely one of the most effective ways in which women writers can make themselves visible.

Women writers are often subject to what Jonathan Gibbs refers to as 'the Franzen problem' in having their work referred to as 'domestic' in contrast to male authors, whose writing is considered 'state of the nation' (Gibbs 2014). Prurient interest in the relationship between the real life identities of authors such as Heti and Ferrante and the content of their novels demonstrates how vulnerable these writers' works are to a certain stuntedness of critical response. As Winterson has commented, there is a resistance to viewing women's writing as experimental and as Heti has observed, there is an eagerness to conflate women's writing with their lived experience and ignore the work of the imagination. This short sightedness results in what Andrew Bennett refers to as 'the crude reductiveness' of biographical readings (2005, p.114). The writers I have studied during the course of my research avoid having their work interpreted in this way by encouraging a new understanding of literature and manipulating literary form, as Boxall writes, 'to imagine and represent the cultures in which we live' (Boxall, 2015, p.8). I argue that

images of disappearance, absence and negation in the works under discussion are related to issues of form and signal a rejection of the existing canon on the part of these writers, heralding their interest in establishing an alternative female canon.

In the self-contained story ‘The Exchange’ which Jhumpa Lahiri includes in *In Other Words* the main character, ‘trapped’ in her identity, wants to ‘say goodbye to the woman who worked for the owner, behind the mirror, at a table’ (2016, p.79). This can be interpreted as an explanation of Lahiri’s decision to write in a language that is foreign to her. In writing in Italian, she disappears the writing self: ‘I come from the void [...] I think that the void is my origin and also my destiny’ (2016, p.159). However, Lahiri also associates the void with the creative impulse – ‘the impulse to fill the frame’ (2016, p.159). When she opts for linguistic exile she is unable to achieve this filling of the frame and the effect is nullifying: ‘not being able to see a specific image in the frame is the torment of my life. The absence of the image I was seeking distresses me. I’m afraid that the mirror reflects only a void, that it reflects nothing’ (2016, p.157). The character in the story works as a translator and the narrative describes how she visits an apartment where women are trying on beautifully designed clothes. The translator doesn’t want any of the clothes she tries on and when she misplaces her sweater she is offered one that isn’t hers. She feels an antipathy towards the replacement sweater and ‘revulsion’ (2016, p.77). In experimenting with writing in Italian, Lahiri translates herself and risks feeling awkward about this reinvented self, dressed in clothes that aren’t her own. As with Cusk’s *Outline* trilogy, characters appear one inside the other like Russian dolls. The translator is invited into the apartment by a beautiful woman in a transparent dress and the owner of the apartment who designed the clothes is described as a ‘foreigner, like the translator’ who

speaks the language of the place perfectly (2016, p.73). These figures, who act as proxies for the writer, are like apparitions and the story has a dreamlike atmosphere. When the translator looks in a mirror she is distracted from her own reflection by a female worker with tired eyes and a 'sorrowful face' (2016, p.75). She wants to say goodbye to this woman before she leaves but she can't find her and the story ends with the translator realising that she prefers the replacement sweater to her own: 'She didn't want to find the one she had lost., she didn't miss it. Now, when she put it on, she, too was another' (2016, p.82). Some kind of shift has occurred as we have been reading – the writer has risked the void, undressing in front of a mirror and trying on different clothes and she has expressed her discomfort. She has attempted to say goodbye to a reflected writer self who 'works for the owner' but is unable to do so and some vestige remains – the replacement sweater. Might the apartment owner who speaks the language of the place, and who designs the clothes, represent writers comfortable inside the existing canon? By rejecting the clothes at first, Lahiri establishes her independence and claims her outsider status. By writing in Italian she seems to have found a sweater that fits.

The first-person narrator of Ottessa Moshfegh's 2018 novel *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* is another character who finds a solution to the void Lahiri mentions. While she fears the void, as Lahiri does, Moshfegh's character takes her destiny into her own hands, locking herself in her own apartment and sleeping herself 'into a new life' (2018, p.260). The end of the book powerfully suggests she wants nothing of the existing world as she experiences it and she is confident of her experiment:

Something had to be burned and sacrificed. And then the fire would burn out and die. The smoke would clear. My eyes would adjust to the darkness, I thought. I'd find my footing. When I came out of the cave, back out into the light, when I woke up at last, everything – the whole world – would be new again. (2018, p.261)

Early drafts of my own novel ended similarly, with Bobbi staying in a room with blackout blinds so dark she can't see her own hand in front of her face and so disappears. However, I opted for a different ending, in which Bobbi is outside of society but has the opportunity to write 'and be written. 'When someone is with me I can write' invokes the company of the reader and suggests the witnessing and the ongoingness that is inferred in Heti's short story *My Life is a Joke*. As with the other writers I have studied as part of my research, I am expressing an optimism in new literary methods with which to represent female experience. These writers reject the literary traditions we have inherited - traditions which marginalise women's voices and disallow female imagination. They recognise the sense in Cixous's advice that 'Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing [...] Woman must put herself into the text-as into the world and into history-by her own movement. The future must no longer be determined by the past.' (1976, p.875) Writers such as Heti, Lahiri and Moshfegh demonstrate consensus with Cixous's view that we have been 'driven away' from writing in the same way that we have been driven away from our bodies, 'with the same fatal goal' (1976, p.875). Their writing articulates this and seeks new paths back to ourselves. These paths risk death and disappearance, re-translation and the void but they are paths nonetheless.

Rachel Cusk's solution to the 'fatal goal' Cixous mentions is to absent the writing body from the writing, and offer her reader an outline only. The central conceit of her *Outline* trilogy, as the title suggests, rests on this offering. By denying the reader a full picture of the narrating self, the author weans her audience off pre-existing literary conditions and introduces new rules for engagement. Cusk's three novels create a 'neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing' (Barthes, 1977a, p.142). Harsh critical reaction to her previous autobiographical work explains why Cusk might want to create such a space in which to slip away but cunningly, she has also found ways to insert herself in the text, should we want to find her. The method by which she achieves this – and by doing so, achieves the kind of witnessing Heti is interested in – is by equating the writing self with the text this self produces. This is something Ferrante also does, and is a technique Andrew Motion has observed in relation to Ted Hughes' *Birthday Letters*.

In *The Author* Bennett comments on Andrew Motion's observation of the relationship between the biographic content of the poems in Ted Hughes' *Birthday Letters* and the degree of their poetic language:

The more closely the poems are tied to biography, Motion argues, the more 'self-protective', the more 'symbolic and private' is the language of the poems. The more explicitly biographical they seem to become, then, the more private and more 'literary' they really are (Bennett, 2005, p.114)

Writers like Cusk and Ferrante adopt this same self protective measure and insure themselves against crude and intrusive interpretation by privileging the literary. Their texts are threaded with images relating to the writing of these texts and this is one way in which they guide their readers' interpretations of their work. Both writers employ literary metaphor as a means by which to both hide and reveal themselves. Bennett considers such 'aestheticizing' as a 'literary parallelism' which allows readers and critics to find meaning in these works beyond the biographical (2005, p.114). All the texts I have chosen for my study display 'self protective' 'literary 'aestheticizing' and it is an element in my own novel *The Weaning*, as demonstrated in Part Two of this thesis.

In Cusk's novel *Transit* the writer-narrator appears on stage at a literary festival with two other writers who are often 'put on a platform' next to one another because 'both their books were categorised as autobiographical'. From this, it seems reasonable to assume that the narrator's own books are categorised similarly and therefore it seems we are being invited by Cusk to apply what her other characters say about their experience to her narrator proxy. These other characters include a confessional writer, Julian⁷, who talks about 'walk[ing] around naked for the rest of your life' and there being 'something of the emperor's new clothes about writing' (2016a, p.100). Meanwhile, his fellow-writer

⁷ The frequency with which the name Julian crops up in recent books by authors interested in writing about self-representation (*Outline, In Other Words* and also in Dave Eggers's *What is the What*) can be traced back to Julian of Norwich, thought to have been the author of the first book in English by a woman which has survived (Juliancentre.org, n.d). Historically, Julian was a name for either gender (SheKnows.com, n.d), which presumably appeals to writers concerned with disguising themselves and with discussing issues relating to the writer, including issues pointing to a male dominated literary canon. Julian's writings have pleasingly archetypal titles (*The Long Text, the Short Text*) which again, would appeal to any writer exploring the act of writing in their work. The single word titles of the novels that make up Cusk's trilogy echo those of early female writers – for example, Julian's *Revelations*, Margery Kempe's *Book*, St Teresa's *Life*.

Louis talks about the ‘limiting’ nature of their practice and his desire not to be known (‘I don’t want anyone to know me’ – 2016a, p.102). It seems significant that both writers make these statements in front of an audience, in an attempt to articulate their experience and make themselves ‘known’.

In an interview with Judith Thurman for *The New Yorker* Cusk describes herself ‘depleted to the point of not being able to create anything’ after the harsh reception of *Aftermath* (Thurman, 2017). Thurman’s article refers to Cusk as a consciously ‘obscured’ writer and Cusk describes herself as having ‘lost all interest in having a self. Being a person has always meant getting blamed for it’ (Thurman, 2017). In her trilogy, Cusk shows little interest in developing her narrator beyond her ability to listen to others and in this way she refuses one narrating self. Occupying the writer Louis’s consciousness, for example, she explores strategies for writing autobiographically:

The truth, he realised, was something he assiduously hid from others. When he wrote his book it was this desire to be free of shame that drove him on. He wrote it in the belief that he was addressing someone who didn’t know him at all, and who therefore he didn’t have to be embarrassed in front of. That person was effectively himself. (2016a, p.102)

Louis describes an act of witnessing and as he explains it, the writer is both performer and audience, author and addressee, interviewer and interviewee. Cusk uses Louis to examine the tensions in an autobiographic practice, having him remember ‘when he had played cat, as it were, to his own bird’ (2016, p.104). Given the criticism her autobiographic work received, the violence of this image is significant. When Louis

elaborates on his sense of self he describes the responsibility he felt watching his cat, Mino, stalking a bird. 'Mino was part of himself', he says (2016, p.104). Louis becomes distracted from the business of his own writing by 'the story that started playing itself out before his eyes':

Nobody, he realised, was controlling that story: either he needed to act and intervene, or he would be hurt by the sight of Mino killing the bird, because it was of course with the bird that he identified, despite the fact that he knew Mino and that Mino was his cat. (2016a, p.104)

Louis experiences his 'public identification with his cat' as being in conflict with his private identification with the bird: 'the sense of responsibility, he realised, came from the active realisation that those two things were about to collide' (2016a, p.104) When the person chairing their event asks Cusk's narrator what she thinks of Julian she says she likes him.

'Julian,' the Chair said, 'or his book?'

As far as I was concerned, I said, they were the same thing.' (2016a, p.123)

The title 'Chair' brings to mind a place where reading might happen and only a sentence later Cusk refers to the Chair's 'button-like eyes', conjuring an image of a comfortable armchair in which one might read a book. By conflating author, narrator and text the writer brings a certain corporeality to her writing and to the written self, which is in

contrast to the vacuum at the centre of the earlier *Outline*. In *Outline*, instead of Winterson's expanded 'I' we get Proust's 'transparent envelope' where one might expect to find the letter 'I' (Winterson, 2014 p. xiii, Proust 1981, p.21). By the time she comes to write *Transit*, Cusk has, as the book's title suggests, made some kind of progress on her journey, and the gap between text and writer-narrator narrows. In a set-piece towards the end of the book her narrator asks about a breed of dog which is described as, 'something midway between the animal and the human' (2016a, p.189). The student who tells about these dogs can be interpreted as a stand-in for the reader and the fact they are hunting dogs serves as a reminder of the narrator's fellow writer Louis and his anecdote about his cat hunting a bird. In Merleau-Ponty's essay *Cezanne's Doubt* he writes that 'the life of an author can teach us nothing' and yet 'if we know how to interpret it—we can find everything in it' (1977, p.105). Merleau-Ponty compares this to observing 'the movements of an unknown animal without understanding the law that inhabits and controls them' and his description of Cezanne as 'never at the center of himself' also seems relevant to any discussion of Cusk's recent work (1945, p.11). Cusk's description of the hunting dogs emphasises their ethereal nature – they are 'fleet and light and pale as phantoms' and move 'in perfect synchronicity' making the student feel 'as though he was being stroked by feathers' yet they 'engulf' him (2016a, p.190). The woman in the student's story-within-a-story about these dogs perceives them as 'some kind of hallucination', 'a series of strange shadows, almost like the shadows of birds' which fly across the page of the book she is reading. The dogs run in packs behind a falcon or hawk:

the bird guiding them towards their prey. In each pack there were two principal dogs whose role it was to watch the hawk as they ran. The complexity and speed of this process [...] could not be overestimated: the pack flowed silently over the landscape, light and inexorable as death itself, encroaching unseen and unheard on its target. [...] the two principal dogs worked in concert, the one taking over while the other rested its concentration and then back again. (2016a, p.192).

Cusk positions the reader as prey – the reader is the writer’s ‘target’ and the writer works in concert with her narrative alter ego to approach unseen. This ‘engulfing’ of the reader by writer on the reader results in another partnership, equal to the pairing of the dogs - Cusk’s hints at the intimate tandem of reader and writer and she signals her intent in the phrase ‘the two dogs sharing the work of reading the hawk’ (2016a, p.192). The equation is not put forward by the writer nor by the narrator the writer uses to communicate with the reader, instead it is given to a student of the narrator’s. Elsewhere in the novel, students are described as ‘parasitical’ (2016a, p.131). This student finds the idea of the paired dogs working to read the hawk ‘very appealing’ because ‘it suggested that the ultimate fulfilment of a conscious being lay not in solitude but in a shared state so intricate and cooperative it might almost be said to represent the entwining of two selves’ (2016a, p.192). This not only evokes the reading experience, it also describes the early parent-child relationship. Seemingly aware of this and hoping to signal this to the reader, Cusk has her narrator compare the dogs’ relation to the hawk with her ‘current awareness’ of her children and rushes to conflate child, reader and text:

On top of that, I said, there was something in the basement, something that took the form of two people, though I would hesitate to give their names to it. It was more of a force, a power of elemental negativity that seemed somehow related to the power to create. Their hatred of me was so pure, I said, that it almost passed back again into love. They were, in a way, like parents, crouched malevolently in the psyche of the house (2016a, p.195)

The language echoes that used to describe the graceful movement of the hunting dogs as they share responsibility for tracking the hawk and it explicitly invokes the child-parent metaphor in relation to the creative process. In the next sentence the narrator mentions her sons' habit of referring to the couple downstairs as trolls, and as with the hunting dogs, the reader is directed to make literary associations between these 'non-human creatures', the children taking their cue from 'fairy-tales they'd read in childhood' (2016a, p.196). In *Kudos* the connection is made even more explicit, with one character explaining to Faye how working on a book with his writing partner is 'a sort of marriage [...] with the books – they were working on another right now – as the offspring' (2018, p.119). The writer-character's reference to working another book 'right now' reminds the reader that Cusk herself is working on us in the same moment, as we compute her words and grasp for her meaning. As with the other authors under discussion, the prominence of literary allusion directs the reader to make connections between the text we are reading, the writer's physical process and the exchange that occurs between reader and writer.

The description of hunting dogs and the hawk in *Transit* emphasises the way the dogs work together which describes what happens when writer, narrator and reader work 'in concert'. However, there is also the threat of potential violence – these are hunting dogs, after all, and Cusk's narrator perceives the 'power to create' in terms of 'elemental

negativity', 'hatred' and malevolence. Elsewhere, Cusk is at pains to remind the reader that we can't expect to know her through her writing. Reading a novel creates a certain intimacy between reader and writer but when Faye meets a man for a date he arrives reading a book which he replaces in his bag before she can see the title, perhaps implying that it is the book we are reading (2016a, p.194). She is careful to inform us that the man is someone she barely knows, as if Cusk is keen to keep us at arm's length and emphasise how little the work reveals of her. In the final book of the trilogy, Faye has receded even further, as if Cusk wants to reinforce the idea that a book can only ever offer 'some kind of hallucination' (2016a, p.190). A fellow writer character she encounters tells her she accidentally put make-up on only one side of her face and describes her affinity with an aeroplane passenger she meets, a 'metal woman' who spent 'six months being reassembled. They built her out of these metal rods and pinned her together [...] into an indestructible, unnatural and possibly suicidal version of herself' (2018, p.57 & p.59). The proximity between Faye's experience as a writer and as a plane passenger invites the reader to conflate the two characters and in this way Cusk encourages us to make connections with the writer, too, but not in a crude or reductive way. She invites us to consider the artistic and formal choices she has made in writing this trilogy. Her invitation is apparent in the way in which the woman writer character encountered by Faye describes her strong identification with the metal woman - 'it suddenly felt like she was talking about me', she says, and relates the metal woman's experience of brokenness and reassemblage to her own experience of having children. 'You survived your own death and there was nothing left to do but talk about it, to strangers on a plane or whoever would listen' she says, which describes Cusk's chosen structure for her three

novels (2018, p.59). The Russian doll-like structure of a metal woman being described by a writer-character encountered by Cusk's writer-narrator reflects the way in which Cusk describes having a child as creating a 'rival consciousness' in *A Life's Work* (2001, p.133). In the new literary form she evolves for this trilogy, these rival consciousnesses are detached from the author 'mother' by three degrees of separation and instead of the 'enfeebling' she experienced as a mother and the 'breach' she experienced as an autobiographic writer, Cusk creates an indestructible textual self as a novelist re-inventing the form (2001, p.133 & Kellaway, 2014). She uses this final book in the trilogy to tie together the threads of the work together by having one of the other writer characters Faye meets makes reference to himself and his wife as falcon and falconer, which recalls the hunting dogs of *Transit* and by reminding the reader of the opening scenes of both *Outline* and *Kudos* by having him compare writers to pilots: 'why should I trust your view of the world? [...] I wouldn't get on board – I wouldn't trust you to take me the distance' ((2018, p.112 & p.115). In this way, Cusk makes her warning to the reader explicit, demanding sophisticated readings of her work instead of interpretations that focus on any similarity between what happens in the text and what happens in the author's life outside of the text.

Like Cusk, Ferrante seems keen throughout her novel series, to impress upon the reader that we should not settle for lazy interpretations of her work. Instead, she encourages us to question what we are reading and interrogate possible meanings. She achieves this by issuing constant reminders that books and writing are not reliable sources of information and by warning against our investment in the book we are reading from the start. One example of this is the book Lila writes as a child in *My Brilliant*

Friend, which is ignored by her teacher, deemed a waste of time and abandoned by its author. It seems significant that Lila calls her story ‘The Blue Fairy’ – a title which, like the name Cusk chooses for her narrator, suggests something insubstantial and ethereal, from the realms of dreams and fairy-tales.

Ferrante is at pains to remind the reader of the illusory and unstable nature of the reading and writing experience. Throughout her novels, words are intimately connected with erasure. In *My Brilliant Friend* for example, Lila’s response to the article Elena writes for ‘a little journal called *Naples, Home of the Poor*’ is to ask ‘Can I erase?’ (2014, p. 298). In *The Story of a New Name* words themselves (admittedly spoken, not written) are presented as capable of erasure:

‘Her husband sleeps here, every weekend, on this side of the bed, and draws her to him, in the afternoon, at night, and embraces her. And yet here, in this bed, she is telling me about Nino. The words for him take away her memory, they erase from these sheets every trace of conjugal love. She speaks of him and in speaking of him she calls him here, she imagines him next to her.’ (2015c, p.256)

The association between this process of erasure and the writing process is evident not only in the notion that words conjure a being (Nino, in this instance) into existence but in the double meaning of the word ‘sheets’ to refer to paper as well as bed linen. Similarly, Lila’s condition of ‘dissolving margins’ emphasises the lack of stability any written account affords, with the word ‘margins’ signalling the association the writer and the translator makes between the writing process and the resulting work.

At the end of Ferrante's quartet, Elena finds herself deserted by her two oldest daughters, by Lila and by the reader who will soon lay the books aside. Elena's youngest daughter who remains is named for Elena's mother but perhaps her name, Immacolata, could also refer to the quasi miraculous nature of the writing process by which a writer creates character and meaning. In an exchange during which Lila suggests she should send Immacolata away, Elena declares 'If Imma leaves me, too, my life will no longer have meaning' (2015a, p.431). Lila's response is to ask 'Where is it written that lives should have a meaning? Is the meaning that line of black markings that look like insect shit?' (2015a, p.431).

Jonathan Gibbs comments that 'Elena doesn't write herself to a place of creativity. She writes herself to exhaustion, to blankness, to failure' but I perceive the nullification Ferrante is writing both towards and away from as freedom rather than failure (Gibbs, 2015a). This 'blankness' is necessary for our reinvention. It is the blank space of the page – the space in which a process of weaning occurs as the writer conjures a public written identity distinct from her private writing self and then separates from this identity, sending her proxy out into the world, to disappear herself once the reader finishes the book. Both writer and proxy disappear, just as the entity Cusk refers to as 'Motherbaby' in *A Life's Work* disappears once a child comes to understand its separateness from the mother and the mother establishes physical independence of her child: 'By its end, Motherbaby is ready for life as mother and baby' (2001, p.94). Significantly, considering her identification of the writing self with houses and home-making, Cusk describes this eventual separation in architectural terms: 'I feel like a house

to which an extension has been added: where once there was a wall, now there is a new room [...] the paint has dried: the joins no longer show' (2001, p.94).

The weaning process incurs feelings of grief and loss for both parties, just as completing the reading or writing of a book can involve such feelings, but weaning affords independence, enabling all parties to recognise their separateness from one another and acknowledge their status as whole entities in themselves. For women writers especially, the act of writing and then separating from our texts can be freeing. In a recent interview, Leila Slimani describes writing as a 'profoundly liberating experience', declaring 'for me it is freedom, freedom from everything: when I write I'm not a woman, I'm not a Muslim, I'm not a Moroccan' (Allardice, 2018). Writing creates a space in which a female author can escape the various identities society assigns her.

Slimani describes the childminder protagonist in her novel as belonging 'to nowhere and no one. [...] She is no one' (Allardice, 2018). During this research project, I sought invisibility, changing my hair colour from a very visible shade of orange, which was often commented on by strangers, to ash blonde – not an unusual choice for a woman of my age and one that will segue into grey. At the beginning of Lessing's *The Summer Before the Dark* Kate Brown's visit to a 'very expensive hairdresser' is deemed necessary to complete her 'rearrangement of herself' (1973, p.41). At the end of the novel her undyed hair is symbolic of her autonomy: 'her hair – No! No-one was going to lay hands on that' (1973, p. 237). While it is offensive that women's visibility in society seems to decline once their 'child bearing years' are over, there can be something freeing about this, too, as Lessing's protagonist discovers. Acquaintances of mine still remark on how

un-used they are to my new hair colour and they ask why I chose to dye it. I tell them I changed it as part of an artistic experiment. ‘And do you miss your orange?’ they ask.

Gibbs notes that Ferrante’s anonymity as an author ‘is as pertinent and powerful and significant as her true identity is irrelevant’ and connects this stance of hers to her creative project, which he describes as ‘unknown’ in contrast with Knausgaard’s, in which ‘we know, completely and utterly, what he was trying to do with his long work – this is why I don’t think the two writers compare’ (Gibbs, 2015a). I agree that Knausgaard and Ferrante are engaged in very different projects but I don’t find Ferrante’s project ‘unknown’. It seems clear to me that she is exploring writing as a means of rendering women and men of a certain social and political class visible. Her profile (or lack of profile) as an author is related to this ambition of hers, in that it allows the writing itself to take centre stage. In this way, the writer becomes her Cixousian sea: ‘our seas are what we make of them [...] and we are ourselves sea’ (1976, p.890).

According to Merleau-Ponty, Cezanne produces ‘an object in the act of appearing, organizing itself before our eyes’(1977, p.96). The organisation of these texts is a crucial part of the writers’ endeavour and the writer leaves evidence of her organising habits so she can hide in plain view. As each narrative concludes, the ‘object’ Merleau-Ponty mentions - in the case of a writer, their book - disappears with the removal of our gaze. Certainly, this is the case in my own novel. The paradox confronting an author is that our practice is productive. No writing practice is capable of producing nothing - no writer can simply ‘disappear’.

In Sheila Heti's short story *My Life is a Joke* the opening question 'didn't you know I had died?' takes the reader into a space where the narrator is dead. However, she remains present and is very much alive, asking for a glass of water, adjusting the microphone, addressing her audience. This ongoingness defies any threat of negation or disappearance which an author's textual replacement or proxy might occasion and the writing provides concrete evidence of the writer's productivity in the artefact of the story itself. It's a brave act, to stand in front of an audience as Heti's character does, and address them. Disappearing inside our characters can be a survival strategy for writers seeking cover - it helps writers survive the kinds of opprobrium and intrusion Cusk and Ferrante have experienced. In spite of playing with images of disappearance and negation, the texts I have studied as part of this research announce their authors' presence as forcefully as the woman behind Charlotte Perkins Gilman's wallpaper announces hers. *I'm in here!* they cry, and the writers invite readers to find them. In Part Two of this thesis I extend this invitation to my own reader.

PART TWO

The Weaning

When I embarked on a series of autobiographic vignettes based on my experiences as an Ofsted registered childminder I soon became aware of the Russian doll complexity of my project which Stein identifies in *Everybody's Autobiography*:

Identity is funny being yourself is funny as you are never yourself to yourself except as you remember yourself and then of course you do not believe yourself. That is really the trouble with an autobiography you do not of course you do not really believe yourself why should you, you know so very well that it is not yourself, it could not be yourself because you cannot remember right and if you do remember right it does not sound right and of course it does not sound right because it is not right. You are of course never yourself. (1973, p. 68)

I struggled to achieve an account that 'sounded right' but as soon as I began writing, my lived experience became something else. Event and incident became words, became scene, became story. As much as I used words, scenes and stories to approximate experience and represent it, language became an obstacle that I tripped over and my project, which began as a self-portrait, swiftly became entangled with the act of writing. My aim was to record my work as a childminder, the recording of that work was mediated through the act of writing and so it was this physical relationship with words that was my experience while I was writing. The prose became infected with images of

lettering, black signs on white space, diaries, stories-within-stories and in drawing attention to this textual materiality and to the artifice involved in storying the self I was influenced by patterning I perceived in recently published works, many of which seemed to hint at the impossibility of forming an adequate and accurate narrating self. The framing device for *The Weaning*, revealed in the brief final section, renders the story the reader has just read a story within a story. The reader has been engaged in the here and now of the story, which is revealed at the end of the novel to be retrospective. What the reader assumed to be the present moment of the story is a retrospective account. In terms of the central metaphor, Bobbi is not fully weaned until the final sentence, when the reader, too, is abruptly cut off from the narrative. No substitute is offered as a replacement for the surrogate ‘breast’ the text has offered. The next book must provide this nourishment, or the reader must make do with life itself.

In the last few pages of Elizabeth Strout’s 2016 novel *My Name is Lucy Barton* the narrator’s daughter tells her ‘Mom, when you get to write a novel you get to rewrite it, but when you live with someone for twenty years, that *is* the novel, and you can never write that novel with anyone again!’ (2016, p.186). Ostensibly the character is referring to her mother’s marriage but her statement accurately describes the writing process and neatly reverses the equation of lived experience translating into writing. Once the act of translation is underway, a transition occurs through the act of writing, during which living and writing become enmeshed. Writing becomes a way of bringing together the ‘jumble of fragments’ which Elena Ferrante describes using a word her mother left her - *frantumaglia* (2016, p.99). The word is ‘used to describe how she felt when she was racked by contradictory sensations that were tearing her apart’ and while I wasn’t aware

of any such sensations when I began writing, certainly the writing process exposed these as my material progressed. In response to one of the questions listed under ‘The Temperature that can Ignite the Reader: A conversation with the listeners of Fahrenheit’ in *Frantumaglia* Ferrante writes that she believes ‘in fiction one pretends much less than one does in reality. In fiction we say and recognize things about ourselves, which, for the sake of propriety, we ignore or don’t talk about in reality’ (2016, p.213).

In her preface to *Aesthetic Autobiography* Nalbantian refers to ‘the aesthetic element of transmutation [...] actual distortions [...] which lead to the ‘larger truths’ of fiction’ (1997, p.ix). She mentions Michel Leiris’s use of autobiography ‘as a vehicle for self-analysis’ but it was only once I abandoned autobiographic form and committed myself to writing a novel that I came to understand the lived experience underpinning my creative process (1997, p.22). It was not the experience of being a childminder informing the writing but my experience of motherhood: My children are young adults and I had no idea how much I missed their baby selves until I started writing about childminding. In her discussion of Barthes’ *Camera Lucida* Anderson describes Barthes’ ‘autobiographical quest for the ‘essence’ of the beloved person which no image can ever quite seem to give back to him’ and this was my experience in trying to recapture my sons’ babyhood in writing (Anderson, 2001, p.76).

Through the process of writing my novel I came to appreciate what influenced my choice to take childminding as a line of work rather than any other. Joan Didion talks about this in her *Paris Review* interview ‘The Art of Non-Fiction No.1’:

I realized some years after *A Book of Common Prayer* was finished that it was about my anticipating Quintana's growing up. I wrote it around 1975, so she would have been nine, but I was already anticipating separation and actually working through that ahead of time. So novels are also about things you're afraid you can't deal with (Didion, 2017).

Childminding work and the work of writing a novel helped me wean myself off my children and encourage their independence. Elkin writes 'it is the work of literature to help us think through the unthinkable' and I made use of my creative research to imagine an unthinkable scenario which I devised in order to create a suspenseful and dramatic way of investigating the sense of loss I experience as my children grow up (Elkin 2018). Not that I understood this strategy of mine at first - it only became apparent as I worked on the novel as the creative element of this thesis.

In *Rootprints* Cixous writes 'if I manage to give passage to this further-than-myself in myself, I will end up myself knowing a bit more about it' (1997, p.56). This was my experience, too, but there was a delay in my comprehending the true subject of my novel because of the way creative practice disguises this until the writer is ready to acknowledge it. I identify with Rachel Cusk's comment that 'the writer is of course capable of awareness, but it may be a state she resists in order to protect and safeguard the unawareness so fundamental to her creativity' (Cusk, 2011). We are only able to construct story and characters while we remain unaware of what these elements signify. Once their meaning becomes apparent, a different kind of work can begin – the work of organising the emerging narrative and shaping events within it.

Cixous refers to perceiving 'naked life, which is 'most true' with the aid of 'poetic writing' and this again reflects my experience (1997, p.3). My creative research served as

both a means of meditating on lived experience, re-living it and examining it for meaning, and also as a means of investigating other texts which seem to meditate on similar subjects. It was also useful in the way Barthes suggests, providing a comfort blanket to ease my passage from one stage of family life to another.

In *Frantumaglia* Ferrante comments that women write about themselves in order to understand themselves and that in moments of crisis, we often calm ourselves and ‘control unease’ by writing (2016, p.285). The trajectory described over the course of the Neapolitan novels can be equated with this process of self-comforting and self-revelation: Elena’s success as a writer means she feels more confident in herself and it is only once she has achieved autonomy that she returns to the neighbourhood, seeing this move of hers as ‘an experiment in recomposition’ (2016, p.262). Ferrante’s narrative arc expresses the coming back to oneself that storying the self entails. In *The Story of a New Name* Lila is afraid of ‘expansion’ but admits that ‘through it the sense of herself returned’ (2015c, p.372). Part of this expansion means finding an adequate structure for the themes of the work and this often impacts on choices where plot and character are concerned. In terms of the creative choices I made when writing my own novel, once I began fictionalising my lived experience I thought as Delphine de Vigan did when she wrote her 2013 memoir *Nothing Holds Back the Night* that ‘I would have no difficulty introducing fiction and no qualms about filling in gaps. [...] I thought I would remain in charge. I thought I would be capable of constructing a story that was fluid and controlled’ (2013, p.114). What I found instead was that the exchange between writer and proxy is truly that - an exchange. I identify strongly with the way in which Ferrante’s characters embody the split between the writing self and the written self. Ferrante’s Lenu and Lila are friends

and rivals and their emotional and intellectual exchange accurately describes the writing process. In *My Brilliant Friend* for example, when Lila edits the article Lenu writes, attention is paid to the annotations she makes in ‘beautiful round handwriting, a handwriting that had remained the same as in elementary school, very different now from mine’ (2014, p.301). The word ‘now’ highlights the process of writing and rewriting that Ferrante describes, signalled early on in the passage. The rest of the paragraph describes how it feels to create character:

On the page was exactly what I had written, but it was clearer, more immediate. The erasures, the transpositions, the small additions, and, in some way, her handwriting itself gave me the impression that I had escaped from myself and now was running a hundred paces ahead with an energy and also a harmony that the person left behind didn’t know she had. (2014, p.301).

So here’s my escape from myself - the proxy I have created in order to disappear and be witnessed doing so. My novel is a way of rearranging myself and a means by which I disappear from a certain version of myself – a societal and indeed social version of myself; apart from the interaction between writer and reader, writing is a fairly anti-social and exclusive activity. My proxy facilitates interaction – between writer and character, between writer and reader. She is running a hundred paces ahead of me and climbing the front steps of a house. She takes a brass doorknocker in her hand. The brass doorknocker is shaped like a hand.

Knock knock.

Who's there?

From somewhere inside (inside where? Inside the reader? Inside the writer?) a door bangs and footsteps sound.

A woman opens the door. Her dark hair is cut into a neat, geometric style and contrasts with her white linen dress. She wears Kohl eye make-up, silver bangles and a plain silver necklace.

‘I’m Bobbi,’ I say.

For the purposes of this creative research, I am she.

The woman tells me to come on in.

I wipe my feet on the doormat, which has the word ‘Enter’ written on it in black letters.

‘Take them off if you like,’ the woman says.

‘Shall I?’

She has bare feet.

‘If you like - whatever makes you feel comfortable.’

She waits while I take off my shoes. I remove my socks too and stuff them inside my bag alongside my certificates.

‘I’m Nikki,’ she says, holding out her handshake.

Her grasp is warm and firm.

‘Come through,’ she says. ‘We’re in the garden.’

I am barefoot like her. She ushers me down a corridor lined with framed black and white photographs on the walls. One of the photographs shows an exotic looking beach, another is of a wedding and there is a large close-up portrait of a baby. Nikki pauses at the end of the hallway while I study the portrait.

‘That’s him,’ she says.

‘He’s beautiful.’

‘He’s going to be a heartbreaker, that’s for sure.’

The baby looks at me with a serious expression. He has the dark hair and dark eyes of an Indian prince or a 1940s cinema idol. I hold his stare while his mother waits.

At the end of the hallway, double doors lead onto a pretty walled garden. Toys are laid out on a rug and a woman sits at a patio table, eyes closed, her face lifted to the sun.

‘My health visitor,’ Nikki explains.

‘I’m just going,’ the health visitor says, but she doesn’t move.

Nikki’s bracelets jangle as she pours me some water from a jug.

‘That’s pretty,’ she says, noticing the tattoo on my wrist of a Russian doll, cheerful and rosy-cheeked. I hold out my wrist and Babushka smiles at us.

‘It must have hurt,’ the health visitor says. ‘Having it done there where the skin’s so thin.’

Her eyes are still closed so I don’t know how she has seen my tattoo. I get my First Aid training and child safety certificates out of my bag. One of my socks tumbles onto the wrought iron table and I quickly pocket it. An electronic baby monitor in the middle of the table crackles and lets out a sigh.

‘We’ll go and get him in a bit,’ Nikki says.

But this baby is eager to meet me - the monitor lets out a yelp and the lights on its display bounce. The health visitor opens her eyes at last and scrapes her chair away from the table.

‘I’ll leave you to it,’ she says.

We follow her to the front door where she reminds Nikki of their next appointment. Nikki writes the details in a thick desk diary on the hallway table and once the health visitor has left, turns to me.

‘I’m struggling, to be honest,’ she says. ‘I’m just not confident I know what I’m doing.’

‘I’m sure you’re doing everything fine,’ I tell her.

‘One of the reasons I thought you might be suitable,’ she says, ‘is that you’re a bit older and a mother yourself.’

She lays her pen down on the open diary. ‘Is it a girl or a boy you’ve got?’

‘One of each.’

‘That’s what I want.’

We climb the stairs and outside a closed door on the uppermost landing Nikki holds a finger to her lips. She opens the door and we move into the room. I can hear a

baby breathing. Soft carpet presses between my toes. Nikki opens the curtains a chink and a bar of sunlight reveals him lying in a cot in the centre of the room. He turns his head to follow his mother. In the womb he would have been sensitive to shifts from dark to light, from asleep to awake, and now here he is, outside of her body, waiting to see what will happen.

‘I like him to have a gentle waking rhythm,’ Nikki whispers.

The baby lies still, trying to decipher the sounds his mother is making. I take a step closer and he hears me, turns his face. His dark eyes hold mine and the rest of the world falls away. I have never met this child but I know him. I know him, and I feel sure he knows me – the intelligence in his eyes tell me so.

‘Hello Pickle’ Nikki says. ‘Hello Babu.’

She lifts him out of his cot, carrying him to the window where she opens the curtains fully. He blinks in the sunshine, twisting in her arms to look at me.

‘Who’s this, Marcel? Who’s this, eh?’

She bounces him on her hip.

‘Hello, Marcel,’ I say, and I take his hand to save me from drowning in the dark of his eyes.

‘I’ll show you around,’ Nikki says. ‘Come.’

Still holding her child’s sleep-warm hand, I follow her out of the room. On the landing, his mother opens another door.

‘Guest room.’

We stand on the threshold, poking our faces into the room, which has sloping eaves and a tiny fireplace, like a doll’s house.

‘I guess if we have another baby this will be his or hers,’ says Nikki.

‘Are you planning to have another one?’

‘Oh yes, but not for a year or so – give this little monkey some time of his own first.’

His fingers are tight around two of mine as we move downstairs to the second floor. His dark head bobs against Nikki’s shoulder.

‘Our room,’ she says, holding open a door.

A smell of lavender hangs in the air and there are more black and white photographs like the ones downstairs, including a framed contact sheet on the wall above the bed which charts the pregnancy of a faceless, naked woman.

‘My husband took those.’ Nikki says, following my gaze.

‘Is he a photographer?’

‘Writer. You’ll meet him.’

‘What kind of things does he write?’

‘Oh, it’s ghost writing projects mainly – that’s where the money is. But there have been a couple of novels.’

She rearranges some necklaces that lie on the top of a chest of drawers. Marcel watches her movements and lets go of my hand to reach for the jewellery.

‘Not those,’ she says. ‘They’re mummy’s.’

‘And what is it that you do?’ I ask.

‘I’m a PR officer for a charity campaigning to raise awareness of modern-day slaves,’ she says.

‘Are there still slaves, then?’

‘You’d be surprised. And not just overseas. There have been prosecutions.’

We cross the landing to a white-tiled bathroom. The window is open, and looks out into the tops of trees. Their fresh green smell fills the space and mingles with the perfume of expensive soap - sandalwood and cinnamon. A white painted washstand holds a changing mat printed with yellow ducklings.

‘He’s in washable nappies,’ Nikki says. ‘Trying to do our bit.’

She opens an airing cupboard that is neatly stacked with nappies, flannels and towels. All three of us stare at the clean linens. Then she wrinkles her nose and sniffs.

‘Have you done something?’

‘Sorry?’

‘Not you. He’s terribly constipated - just the tiniest nuggets but no real issue. Would you mind? It’s a two man job.’

She lays Marcel on the duckling changing mat and asks me to hold down his arms. He stares at me as his mother pulls off his clothes and inspects the contents of his nappy. I smile at him but he remains solemn.

‘Poor lamb, you really are bunged up, aren’t you,’ Nikki says.

She holds both his ankles lifting them in one hand to clean his bottom with the other, wiping and wiping then releasing his ankles and dabbing quickly at his penis with a fresh wipe. Then she fastens a new nappy and asks if I will take him. My fingertips scrape against the cool plastic of the changing mat as I pick him up and I can’t help rocking from one foot to another – as if his weight sets off a rhythm inside me. I kiss his hair. He smells of warm bed.

‘I can see you two are going to get along,’ Nikki says, glancing at us in the mirror above the sink where she is washing her hands. Then she turns to face me.

‘I don’t suppose you could spare an hour or two now, could you? I could get some work done while you guys hang out in the garden.’

‘Of course,’ I say.

‘Wonderful! Thank you so much!’

We go downstairs with me treading carefully, oh so carefully, imagining how his little body would thud and bounce if I dropped him.

‘Lounge.’

This room is large and airy, furnished with leather sofas, Indian rugs, and an old-fashioned writing desk in one corner. The walls are hung with large abstract paintings.

‘Who’s the artist?’ I ask.

‘My father-in-law,’ Nikki says, ‘He was quite famous in his day. I’m not sure I like his work much but there you have it.’

She gazes at the canvases and so does Marcel. He has the poise of a miniature Maharajah surveying his estate but I feel him tense with excitement when Nikki pulls out a crate from the bottom shelf of a bookcase.

‘Toys.’

She shoves the crate back into place and our tour of the house ends in the basement kitchen where I am shown bottles and teats in a state-of-the-art steriliser.

‘He usually has a bottle around now,’ she says.

‘Would you like me to feed him?’

‘You’re sure you don’t mind?’

‘Of course not.’

‘And this would be gratis?’

‘Sorry?’

‘A free trial, as it were.’

She fixes me with her brown-black eyes.

‘Yes,’ I say.

She makes up a bottle and watches me settle with her child on one of the dining chairs, which are transparent, made from clear Perspex or fibre glass.

‘Give me a shout if you need anything,’ she says.

‘We won’t need anything,’ I say.

Marcel watches her go out of the room as I tilt the bottle to his mouth. The gesture, the angle, everything about this movement is as familiar as if I were tilting it to mine. He begins to suck but keeps his gaze fixed on the space his mother has left. When he realises she isn’t coming back he turns his eyes on me, staring into my face. I pretend not to notice his interest, looking around the room to allow him to study me while he feeds.

The kitchen cabinets and surfaces are white and everything gleams. The black and white floor tiles are like a giant chessboard. An old-fashioned clock hangs on one wall while on the other, a poster shows a friendly nurse in a starched white head-dress. She holds a tray on which there is a packet which bears the same image, of the benign-looking nurse with rosebud lips and shiny cheeks, holding her tray which carries the same packet with the same image, and so on into infinity, it seems. I stare and stare at the poster, trying to locate the tiniest nurse, losing myself in her labyrinth while Marcel’s

head, with its dark, soft hair, weighs against my arm. We are mother and child. The fibre glass of the chair, the plastic of the bottle, the metal of the microwave, kettle, toaster – these things are manufactured while this baby and I, we are flesh, we are Nature. I close my eyes. A clock ticks its soft, steady tick and Marcel sucks to the same rhythm. A bird is singing and I can hear train announcements coming from the nearby railway station.

When he has finished his milk, Marcel pops the teat out of his mouth and straightens his little legs, straining his body forwards, trying to sit upright.

‘Shall we go in the garden?’ I ask him.

We rinse his bottle at the sink then go outside where the air is warm after the cool basement. I lay Marcel down and he bats my hair which I swish to and fro in front of him. He manages to catch a fistful and when I loosen his fingers there are a few strands left in his grip. I sprinkle these onto the grass for some bird to collect for its nest. After hair swishing we lie side by side looking up into the branches of an overhanging tree, the coolness of the ground seeping through the rug. He doesn’t have the strength yet, to roll onto his front so I push his little body, showing him how it will feel when he can do it for himself. I roll him over and then back again and then, because I like the weight of him against my hand, the resistance of his little body as it tips from one position to another, I do it again and again until he complains. Then I hold him upright and he paddles his little feet in my lap, marching in time to my rendition of The Grand Old Duke of York.

Some time later, Nikki sticks her head out of an upstairs window.

‘Can you give me five more minutes? It’s his lunchtime but I’m waiting for an e-bay bid.’

I give her a thumbs up and wave Marcel's hand in reply but she has already disappeared.

I carry him indoors.

'Have you had a lovely time?' she asks when she joins us.

She holds out her arms for Marcel and kisses him loudly when I pass him to her. Then she fastens a plastic bib around his neck and straps him into a high chair. She takes an ice cube tray out of the freezer.

'For his lunch, just pop one of these into a bowl and zap it for thirty seconds,' she says.

All three of us wait for the microwave timer to ping.

When it is ready, she stirs the food and makes approving noises. But Marcel doesn't want the puree. He turns his face away and when she tries again he cries out and lurches from side to side to avoid the spoon.

'Everything's a battle,' Nikki says.

'Shall I have a go?' I ask.

Nikki hands me the dish and I touch the spoon to my own lips.

'I'd prefer it if you didn't do that,' she says, fetching a replacement from a drawer.

She watches me dip the clean spoon into the puree and hold it out. Marcel arches his body away from me.

'This isn't working,' Nikki says, getting him out of the high chair.

'He's probably not that hungry,' I say. 'He drank a bottle fairly recently, after all.'

The baby flails in his mother's arms, crying now. I try to catch his hand and soothe him by singing some of the songs he enjoyed in the garden but he is wailing and can't hear me.

My time is up. Nikki leads me to the front door with Marcel complaining in her arms. She jiggles him up and down, shushing him while I sit on the stairs to put my shoes and socks back on.

'Sometimes I wonder if it would be different if he was a girl,' she says.

She opens the door and Marcel grows calmer. Nikki plucks a leaf from a bay tree that stands on the top step, holding the leaf under her nose before allowing it to flutter to the ground.

'Thank you for your time,' she says. 'How would you feel about working for us?'

'That would be wonderful,' I say.

A tear trembles in Marcel's eyelashes. I lean forward to kiss him goodbye but Nikki is surprised by my gesture and steps backwards on the 'Enter' door mat, stumbling slightly. To cover up any awkwardness I kiss her too.

'I'll be in touch,' she says.

A smell of dust rises off the pavement and the sky darkens behind the tall white houses. By the time I am halfway down the hill, big spots of rain hit the pavement and there is a rumble of thunder. A bus slows to a halt, its brakes whining, and as I hop on there is a loud crack and a torrential burst of rain.

'Just in time!' I say, but the driver doesn't respond other than to scoop the coins I place in the tray and hand me a ticket. Other passengers lift their heads from phones and newspapers to stare out of the spattered windows. Our breath mists the glass.

The bus winds down the hill and through town. A young woman gets on and sits next to me. She holds her phone in front of her face and I can see who she is talking to in the postage stamp sized image in the right-hand corner of the screen where a man and a woman in a different time zone are walking through a city at night. They aren't speaking English. From the way they smile at the girl, I assume she is their daughter. They are pleased to hear from her, they are delighted she rang, they want to know how she is doing in a country far, far away from where they are. The girl chatters without noticing me watching over her shoulder. I am part of her conversation with her parents, even though I can't understand anything they are saying. I will go and see my mother tomorrow.

I am so engrossed in the foreign girl's conversation with her parents I almost miss my stop. It's raining hard so I duck inside the mini market at the end of our road. The bell on the shop door rings as I slam it behind me. Sameer, the shopkeeper, looks up from his task. He is re-stocking the cigarette display behind his counter. Smoking Kills.

What to make for tea? I pick up a box of eggs. My kids will complain but an omelette is cheap and quick. I add a chocolate bar and a packet of bubble-gum as compensation and place the items on the counter among Sameer's jumble of cigarette packets. Protect Children: don't let them breathe your smoke.

The bell rings again and we both look round to see a man with silver hair wiping his feet on the mat just inside the shop doorway. It is my new neighbour, shaking himself like a dog. He moved into my street only a couple of months ago and I have watched him renovate his house, sanding and painting the front door, carrying building materials in and out, leaving a trail of plaster-dust footprints on the pavement. I thought he might

have a family who would move in with him once the house was finished but he seems to be living there by himself.

'Alright?' he says, nodding at Sameer and me.

He grabs an onion from the vegetable rack, tosses it in the air and catches it.

Sameer continues to slot packets of cigarettes onto the shelves behind his counter while I dig in my bag for my purse.

'Taking up smoking?' asks my neighbour.

He gestures at the jumble of cigarette packets on the counter.

'Always,' I say.

His eyes are very blue. He gives Sameer the exact money for his onion. His hands are freckled with paint. Warning: Smoking is highly addictive: Don't start. I pay for my shopping and pocket the sweets I have bought.

'Ready to make a run for it?' my neighbour says as we move towards the door.

He holds out his jacket above both our heads.

'It's only water,' I say.

I step out of the shop.

'You're right,' he says, lowering his jacket.

Rain plasters our hair to our faces.

'Well, see you then.'

He glances at my clothes, which cling to my breasts, then quickly looks away and crosses the road to his house. I enter the door code to my building and climb the stairs to my flat.

'Hello?'

I sling my keys onto the hallway table and move into the kitchen, peeling off my clothes as I go. I fetch a towel from the bathroom to dry my hair. Hopefully Nikki remembered to bring Marcel's toys in from the garden.

I crack the eggs into a bowl.

'If you're going to make an omelette, you've got to break some eggs,' I say to no-one.

Whisking the eggs has me wondering what my neighbour is having for his tea. Our kitchen is at the back of the flat but if I look out of my bedroom window I can see right into his house. I take the bowl through to my bedroom.

Johnny's i-pad is laying on my bed and the duvet is rumpled and messy. I can always tell when my youngest has been in my bed because his i-pad is out of battery and my duvet is bunched up into one corner of its cover. I plug in the i-pad and shake out my bedclothes, smoothing them and making the bed look nice. It looks so nice I have to have a lie down.

It is dark when I wake up, and the rain has stopped. The street lamp outside my bedroom window has come on but there are no lights on in my neighbour's house. When I go into the living room John is there, sitting on the sofa in his school uniform with his i-pad.

'Oh, you're here! Why didn't you wake me?

'You were asleep,' he says. 'What's for tea?'

'Omelette.'

I return to my bedroom to fetch the eggs. John and I eat our tea on our laps in front of the television. He tells me he plans to take up smoking because it made Walter Raleigh feel better while he was waiting for his head to be chopped off. My boy is a sucker for history. He tells me the executioner gave Raleigh's head to his wife, who carried it around in a little velvet bag.

'Would you keep mine?' he asks.

'Your what?'

'My head, if it was chopped off.'

'While all around men are losing theirs,' I reply, but he doesn't know Kipling's poem so I Google it and make him recite it out loud with me until Lily bangs on the wall and yells at us to shut up.

'When did she get in?' I ask, and John tells me she's been home ages.

I knock on Lily's door to see if she wants anything to eat but she hates omelette. I put the bubble-gum on the floor outside her door, like the mince pie and sherry offerings she used to leave for Father Christmas when she was little.

Later, I Google Nikki's husband, the writer, and her father-in-law, the painter. Her husband's solemn expression reminds me of Marcel. I find several pictures on his publisher's website of him and Nikki at various literary events. In some of the pictures he sports a flamboyant moustache and in one of the photos Nikki holds a cigarette. Across the road, Sameer's shop is still open so I nip over and buy a packet of fags. I smoke one leaning out of my bedroom window. Across the road, my neighbour is home. I can see him in the lighted window of his house, dancing.

* * *

The next time I visit Marcel I can hear a terrible wailing.

'Dog – don't be alarmed,' Nikki says, when she opens the front door. 'Rob usually takes him to the office but he hasn't left yet. He's a pain in the arse, if I'm honest,' she whispers.

I'm not sure if she means her husband or the dog.

She leads me into the living room where Marcel lies on a sheepskin in the middle of the floor. The contrast of his dark hair against the whiteness of the room and the white fur rug is striking. He looks like a raven chick in snow.

Nikki's husband is sitting at the old-fashioned writing desk but gets to his feet as we enter. He is a giant of a man, towering above his wife and me. He has a shock of wild, sandy-coloured hair.

'Here she is, the woman of the hour!' Nikki says. 'Bobbi, this is my husband, Rob - Rob, this is Bobbi.'

She falls briefly against her husband, laughing, and he gently pushes her away so she stands upright once more. He holds out one of his enormous hands for me to shake.

'Are you a Roberta?' he asks.

His voice is as deep and resonant as an opera singer's.

'Sorry?'

'Are you a Roberta or is Bobbi your given name?'

'Given, yes,' I tell him.

In life I can't see any resemblance between this man and his son. When we drop hands he rubs his hair vigorously and smooths it behind his ears.

‘Can I pick him up?’ I say, indicating Marcel on the floor.

‘Oh god, yes – do!’ Nikki says. ‘Someone might tread on him!’

I kiss Marcel hello. He smells of oats and yeast, with a tang of sheepskin. He smells of Nature. I breathe him in.

‘Now you’ve met the help you can get off to work,’ Nikki says to her husband.

She winks at me and downstairs the dog lets out a prolonged howl. Behind the house, a train slows to a halt.

‘10.17,’ Rob says.

‘I’ll get the 10.40,’ Nikki says.

In the basement, the dog continues to complain so she goes downstairs to release him.

‘I like your ink,’ Rob says, gesturing at my tattoo.

‘Thanks.’

We stand opposite one another, his child in my arms. Neither of us knows what to say.

‘Is your office nearby?’ I ask.

‘Just around the corner. To be honest I could work from home but the concentration’s not so good here, especially with this little chap to distract me.’

He takes Marcel’s hand and pumps it up and down on the words ‘this’, ‘little’ and ‘chap’ and we are saved from another awkward silence by a clatter of claws on wooden floor as a German Shepherd bounds into the room. It buries its head in my crotch.

‘Sorry,’ Nikki says.

I nudge the dog away with my knee.

'What's its name?'

'This is Pinch.'

'It's from Shakespeare,' Rob says.

'We were planning to get another one and call it Bottom,' Nikki says, 'but one dog is enough so the joke kind of ran dry.'

'One dog is too much,' Rob says.

Marcel twists in my arms, looking over one shoulder and then the other, following the movements of the animal whirling around our legs.

'Now, Bobbi,' Nikki says, grabbing its collar. 'We had a think about what you could do with Little Lord Fauntleroy here and we wrote out a provisional timetable...'

As the dog tugs at her arm she manages to snatch a piece of paper from the old-fashioned writing desk and hand it to me.

'Provisional only,' Rob says.

'Can you take this hound?' Nikki asks him. 'I need to go.'

On the piece of paper there is a list written in elegant, looping handwriting.

10.00 – 12.00 playgroup/activity

12.00 – 12.30 bottle/nap

12.30 - 1.30 playtime

1.30 – 2.30 lunch

2.30 – 3.30 park/activity

3.30 - 4.00 bottle/nap

4.00 – 5.00 playtime

5.00 – 6.30 supper

Marcel has a handful of my hair gathered in his fist, ready for our swishing game. A swishing game could last for hours, which will throw out the timetable we have been given.

‘Is that do-able, do you think?’ Nikki asks.

She fetches a smart coat from the hallway and comes to stand in the living room doorway to put it on.

‘This is do-able,’ I say.

‘Lovely. And it would be helpful if you could write stuff down, you know? What he eats, when he poos, what time he sleeps. That would be a real help.’

She attaches a lead to the dog’s collar and hands it to Rob.

‘Bye bye, bunny,’ she says, turning to Marcel and me. ‘Have a wonderful day!’

She kisses him and I catch her scent. Then she whisks out of the room and the front door slams and the sound of her heels on the pavement grows fainter.

‘I’d better be on my way too,’ Rob says.

His wife’s perfume hangs in the air around us. He straps a soft leather satchel diagonally across his body then pats his chest, his hips, as if he has lost something.

‘You’ll need a key,’ he says.

He digs inside his pocket and hands me a key on a plastic fob which has a photo of a man walking a gigantic rooster on a lead. The caption underneath the photograph reads ‘This Man has a Giant Cock’.

For our morning activity, I take Marcel upstairs to his parents’ bedroom and we rootle through their drawers and wardrobe. With Marcel propped up against Indian

embroidered cushions on the bed, I model his father's jackets in front of the mirror. They are enormous on me. A leather satchel hangs on the back of the bedroom door, newer and smarter than the one Rob left the house with. There is nothing inside it. I strap it diagonally across my body and put on a deep voice.

'Daddy's home,' I say.

Marcel stares at me and looks a little disapproving so I take off his father's clothes and we try on Nikki's necklaces instead. Marcel looks like a Hindu god in them but he doesn't like the feel of the jewellery against his skin, pawing at the necklaces to get them off so I wear them.

Downstairs, we study the art work on the walls. The paint rises off the canvases like cake icing. Life seems to bulge under the surface, as if the figures are bursting to get out and run around the room. I hold Marcel up in front of one of the pictures.

'Your grandad painted this,' I tell him, and I stroke his fingers across the textured surface.

'Is that a man or a lady, do you think?'

We trace the dark figure standing in the background of the painting.

'Is it a mummy waiting to see her baby do you think?' I whisper, but his head feels heavy and I realise he has fallen asleep. I sit on the sofa and watch his back rise up and down in rhythm with my breathing. I listen to the trains pass by the back of the house while he dozes. A faint tremor announces each one, making the window frames rattle slightly.

Marcel sleeps for almost an hour and then with a slight shiver, he stirs and lifts his head. He smiles at me and a lightness runs through my body.

‘Hello sweetness,’ I say. ‘Hello, Pickle.’

I feed him a bottle. I am still wearing his mother’s necklaces and he fingers them while he sucks. After milk, I put him in his buggy and we go to the park.

The park has been re-designed since I came here with my children. John and his friends used to climb on the roof of the bowling green clubhouse but someone set light to it and now there is a patch of burnt ground where it stood. The generation who play bowls is dying off so the bowling green has been given over to ‘meadow maintenance’. A notice pinned to the low metal fence carries information about the seeds which have been sown. Wild flowers will grow here in summer. In the playground, palm trees next to the sandpit make the place look something like the beach in the photograph hanging in Nikki’s hallway. We head to a bench where we sit and watch parents sifting sand through their fingers and burying their feet. Older children rush around the space, swarming over the climbing frame, shooting down the slide. Marcel sits on my lap, a still centre amid all this activity, his body resting against mine.

A woman enters the play area, carrying a little girl on her hip and steering a buggy with her free hand. She fastens the gate behind her and parks her buggy next to Marcel’s.

‘Gorgeous day,’ she says, threading her child’s limbs through the holes in the moulded plastic seat of the swing. She gives the swing a push and her little girl leans forward, staring at the ground as she sweeps forwards and backwards.

‘Hot, isn’t it?’ the mother says. She takes off her cardigan and hooks it over the frame of the swing. ‘I can’t believe it’s so warm. The weather’s gone mad.’

‘Yes, Nature’s all topsy-turvy.’

‘I like your necklaces,’ she says, eyeing Nikki’s jewellery. ‘They look good all together like that.’

‘Thanks.’

‘How old’s your little boy?’

She assumes Marcel is mine and I don’t correct her. After all, for the hours we are together he is mine. He is mine and I am his.

‘Six months.’

‘She’s nearly a year but I’ve got a twelve-year old too,’ the other mother says.

‘Bit of a gap!’

Her little girl rocks back and forth, legs dangling.

‘I think I recognise you,’ the woman says. ‘Have we met before?’

‘I don’t think so,’ I say.

‘Your face is familiar,’ she insists. ‘I’m sure I know you.’

‘Maybe we’ve seen each other here,’ I say.

John is twelve - I probably pushed him side by side with this mother’s older child on these same swings but I don’t tell her that. Instead, I tell her it is time for me to go and she tells me to have a nice rest of my day.

‘What’s for dinner?’ John asks when I get home.

My children are toe-to-toe on the sofa, heads bowed over their devices.

‘How about a takeaway?’

They can’t believe their luck. I phone for a pizza and when the delivery guy buzzes at the door I pay him with notes from the old-fashioned ‘wages’ envelope Rob

handed me when he came home. It has my name written on it in the same writing as the timetable, mis-spelled with an 'y' instead of an 'i'.

What my children don't know is that the pizza is a trade for the visit I want them to make tomorrow.

'I'm going over to Gran's in the morning, will you come? I thought you could use her for your art project, Lils.'

'What about John?'

'He came last time. It's your turn. She won't be around forever - one day you'll want to see her and she'll be gone.'

We open our pizza boxes. Lily plucks at a piece of mozzarella with the delicacy of a harpist.

'I'll pay you,' I say.

'How much?' John asks.

'No, forget that.'

Pizza is one thing but to offer money feels wrong.

'I'll give you something. You can choose.'

Lily looks at me and points a half-chewed pizza crust at my blouse.

'Done.'

Later that evening, when I undress for bed, I knock on her door.

'Here's that blouse,' I say.

Her room smells warm and dry and papery. She is sitting in bed writing out Shakespeare quotes for her mock. Fluorescent pink and yellow post-it notes decorate the walls. I lay the blouse on the end of her bed and she lifts her sweatshirt over her head.

She gets out of bed and puts on my top. As she twists this way and that in front of her bedroom mirror I can see my own reflection behind hers and when she moves in front of me her face eclipses mine, a facsimile of mine, mine a worn version of hers. She glances at me in the mirror, shy because she is pleased with how the blouse looks on her. As we study our double reflection our bodies seem inseparable, as when I was pregnant with her. For a brief moment I have difficulty telling one of us from the other, like I did when she was tiny, in those first weeks after her birth when it was unclear for each of us where my body ended and hers began. She is so pleased with the blouse that she reaches behind her and takes my hands, placing them around her waist. She traces my tattoo sleepily with her fingertips like she did when she was little and the expression on her face is not dissimilar to my rosy-cheeked Babushka, whose smile speaks of the love she has for the smaller dolls on her insides.

* * *

The next day we catch a bus over to my mother's. The unusually warm weather has given way to a colourless sky and Lily shivers at the bus stop in my blouse.

Mum lives in sheltered accommodation on the outskirts of town. We get off at the ring road and walk a little way to her block, calling hello as we let ourselves into her flat. She is sitting in her armchair in the living room with her aged dog, Little Legs, on her lap.

The television volume is turned up loud. Mum offers us her cheek to kiss.

'You smell nice,' I say.

'Eh? Let me put this off, wait a minute.'

She fumbles for the remote which Lily hands her.

'What did you say?'

'Your hair smells nice, that's all.'

'My dog's got no nose,' she says, and she pokes Lily in the ribs but Lily doesn't know the joke.

'How does he smell?' I say.

'Terrible.'

She pats Little Legs and tells him she doesn't mean it.

'Lily wants to draw your portrait, Mum.'

'Homework, is it?'

'You have to sit really still.'

'I ain't going anywhere.'

Mum tips Little Legs off her lap and smooths her skirt, which could do with a wash. Lily clatters around in the kitchenette, gathering up a packet of gravy granules, some liquid soap, an old-fashioned biscuit tin decorated with a picture of chrysanthemums.

‘We’re meant to draw the person with things that represent them,’ she explains.

She arranges the items on Mum’s hostess trolley, picks up Little Legs and repositions him on her grandmother’s lap. As she starts sketching, I put away the clean washing I’ve brought with me. Sheets, towels and underwear fill the drawers to the sound of her pencil scratching.

‘How are the children?’ Mum asks. ‘Are they doing well? Are they thriving?’

‘I’m fine thanks, Nan,’ says Lily, and her grandmother look surprised at the sound of her voice, as if she had forgotten she was there.

Once all the washing has been put away I move into the bathroom where I scrub the tiles and bleach the yellowing rim of the toilet. The extractor fan whirrs while I polish the mirror my mother probably looks in every morning – does she still look, I wonder? And if she does, does she recognise herself there? My own face is close to the glass as I work. I breathe on the mirror then rub it with my cloth to shine it. Is there something of Mum’s reflection left behind the glass? Or inside it, maybe? Merging with mine now as I rub and rub.

When I have finished, I fill the kettle in the kitchen and make three cups of tea, arrange some biscuits on a plate. Lily is pleased with her drawing, even though she admits it doesn't look like her grandmother.

‘It looks like someone, though, doesn't it?’ she says. ‘That's the main thing.’

She holds out her pad and squints at the portrait.

'It looks more like you, Nan, if you look at it like this,' she says.

Meanwhile, Mum is studying a biscuit, turning it round and around in her hand.

'Are you going to eat that?' I ask her.

'It's got something in it,' Mum says, pointing at the hole in the middle of the chocolate ring.

'It's a hole,' I tell her. 'It's a biscuit with a hole in it. A ring, you know?'

'No, in the middle, see? There's something.'

'It's like a polo, you know? The mints?'

'Mince?'

'It's nothing – the something you can see is nothing – look.'

I put my finger through it and wiggle it at her, hold it up to my eye like a monocle and peer at her through it. I want to make her laugh but she gives a little sigh and shakes her head. For a few moments she looks baffled and then she is herself again. Except she is no. She hasn't been herself for a while.

Lily adds to her drawing, sketching the window behind Mum's head, and through it, a view of the hedge bordering the communal garden, stretching away in perspective. The line of the window bisects the page and it looks as if Mum has a stalk growing out of her hair or an alien's antenna. I make the mistake of saying so and Lily scribbles all over her drawing and announces she is ready to go.

'How are the children?' Mum asks when we say goodbye. 'Are they thriving?'

Lily kisses her but she looks right through her, as if she is a ghost. Whenever I leave her, I don't know who will be here next time I come. Will it be Mum or will it be

the strange, vacant little lady who sometimes sits in her armchair? The one with stains on her skirt. I am gripped by an anxiety that perhaps she won't be here at all so I pop in to see Jacqui, who lives on the ground floor and is the manager of Mum's block. Lily huffs and puffs, complaining that we have been here too long already.

Jacqui is watching the news and has half an eye on the television while I tell her about the biscuit with the hole in it.

'She's getting confused about really normal things,' I say.

'My mum was the same,' Jacqui says. 'She barely knew me by the end. Just go with the flow, that's my advice.'

'But if our own mothers don't know us, how can we know ourselves?'

But Jacqui doesn't have an answer, she tells me to put my trust in God.

'It's out of your hands,' she says.

When we get off the bus Lily wants money for sweets. I hand her some coins and she disappears inside the shop. My neighbour is crouched at the side of the road, a little way off.

'What have you found?' I ask.

In the kerb, a tiny furry creature lies curled in on itself, eyes closed.

'Baby squirrel.'

'Is it dead?'

'I don't think so. It must have fallen out of its tree.'

We both look up into the branches of a tree that clatters buses going past.

'I'm thinking of moving it, in case a dog gets it or something.'

'Go on then.'

He puts down the litre of milk he is holding and holds out a bunch of keys. I take the keys and he cups one hand and with the other, scoops the animal gently into his palm.

'Now what?'

'Have you got a box? We could take it to a Squirrel Rescue Centre.'

'Is there such a thing?'

'Bound to be.'

We go inside the shop and ask Sameer if he has a box he can give us.

'I could get a towel or something to make it more cosy for the little fella,' my neighbour says, and together we cross the road to his house. I wait on the pavement holding the 'Wotsits' box with the baby squirrel in it while he unlocks his front door and goes inside. A smell of fresh paint wafts through the open door and I can see a bike helmet hanging on an empty coat hook.

He emerges after a few minutes and tucks a towel inside the box.

'My van's this way,' he says.

We walk around the corner. Someone has leaned an old mattress against a wall with a hand-written note attached. 'Take Me'.

'Is the little fella ok?' my neighbour asks.

I lift the corner of the faded yellow towel inside the box and tell him I think he's alright.

His campervan has checked curtains at the windows and there is a small sink and hob in the back. A collection of maps is tucked next to the driver's seat. I sit in silence with the

box on my lap while my neighbour searches for local animal rescue centres on his phone. When he has found one he starts the engine and hands me his phone where our route is marked.

‘Head straight onto the main road,’ I say, and he does.

The young woman on reception wears a pink tabard with the rescue centre logo on its breast pocket. She has pink varnished fingernails and dyed pink hair.

‘Ah, it’s only a baby!’ she says when she looks inside the box. ‘Leave this little guy with us.’

‘If it’s alright with you, we’ll wait,’ my neighbour says.

‘It’ll be a while before it gets seen,’ she says.

‘Have you got a lot of patients, then?’ I ask.

‘We’re always busy,’ the receptionist says, and she invites us to take a seat. Then she gets up from her desk and disappears into a back office.

‘What do you call a baby squirrel?’ my neighbour asks.

‘How about Nutkin?’

‘No, what’s the correct term, I mean.’

‘A wotsit?’ I guess, reading the word written on the sides of the box.

My neighbour gets out his phone and reads his findings aloud.

‘Baby squirrels are called babies or infants while in the nest.’

The receptionist returns and sits behind her desk. Her fingernails tap noisily on the computer keyboard. Then a door opens and a young woman in veterinary overalls crosses the waiting area to where we are sitting. Her overalls have the rescue centre icon

on the breast pocket and her white rubber shoes squeak on the shiny floor.

‘Are you the couple who brought in the baby squirrel?’

‘We are,’ says my neighbour.

‘Will it survive?’ I ask.

‘There’s a good chance it will,’ says the vet. ‘Thank you for bringing it in. We’ll check nothing’s broken, keep it fed and watered and when it’s strong enough it will be released back into the wild.’

‘It’s too young to be released, surely?’ I say.

‘We’ll care for it here until it’s strong enough to look after itself.’

‘You’ve got cages out the back?’

The young woman frowns slightly.

‘I don’t follow...’

‘Cages where you keep all the squirrels and badgers and things?’

We ask if we can see where the animals are kept – as if we are parents considering a boarding school for our child. The vet tells us the public are only permitted to see the animals on Open Days. She asks the receptionist for a leaflet listing Open Day dates and her shoes squeak noisily as she goes over to the desk. A look passes between her and the pink-haired woman as she takes the leaflet and squeaks back across the waiting area to hand it to us. We make a donation towards the cost of our squirrel’s rehabilitation and drive home.

‘Well, thanks,’ I say when my neighbour has parked the van. ‘That was... interesting.’

‘Yes.’

He pulls a 'sad' face, as if to acknowledge that we did what we could and there is nothing more we could have done.

'I'll be seeing you,' I say.

'I expect so.'

Outside the shop, Sameer is flattening cardboard boxes for collection. He looks at us but doesn't say anything. I step off the kerb to cross the road. When I look back, my neighbour is chatting with Sameer and I know he is telling him about our squirrel.

* * *

'I think I've got a new man,' I tell my mother the next time I see her.

As much as anything I am testing out the sentence to see how it sounds.

I like the way it sounds.

'I see,' Mum says. But she doesn't really.

Her hair is un-brushed and her clothes look as if she put them on in a hurricane. A ready-meal stands on the kitchen counter, cooked and still in its plastic tray, untouched. There is a knife and fork and an empty plate next to it, as if someone was prepared to eat it or someone prepared it for Mum to eat it. I don't know who prepared it. It could have been Mum or it could have been Jacqui.

'You didn't eat your dinner, Mum,' I say.

'I don't feel like it.'

'But what about last night?'

'I didn't feel like it then either.'

I make her a jam sandwich cut into triangles like the ones I used to make for John and Lily's lunch boxes when they were small. She devours it, her face muscles working fast. I make her another one and she eats that, too.

'How are the children?' she asks, but I know she doesn't know who I am.

'Are they thriving?' she asks.

I miss her, even though we are in the same room. Is it foolish to want so badly to be present in the mind of another? My mother affirms who I am - she is my mother, after all. She made me. I try going with the flow like Jacqui has told me but our exchanges grow more and more outlandish. When I am putting away clean washing she tells me the

queen dirtied her towels.

‘Did she? The queen? She's like that, so I've heard.’

‘Dirty hussy,’ Mum says.

She is not the woman I knew. She is someone new.

* * *

For one of his ‘activities’ Nikki asks me to take Marcel to a baby signing class.
‘If he can learn to communicate with us it will stop all the un-necessary crying,’
she
says.

‘Babies cry,’ I tell her. ‘It’s what they do.’
‘Only because they can’t make themselves understood,’ Nikki says. ‘See what
you think.’
It’s fun - I think you’ll enjoy it and you get a croissant at half time.’

The class is held in a church hall in the middle of town. Nikki has phoned ahead
to say I will be bringing Marcel. When I arrive, I am greeted by a woman in a yellow
sweatshirt who shows me where to park my buggy. Her sweatshirt has the word
‘instructor’ written on the back.

Lily used to come here for brownies. Brown Owl invited us to a ceremony where
a round piece of cardboard covered in silver foil was a pond and we were told to close
our eyes and imagine we were in a forest glade.

‘Twist me and turn me and show me an elf.’
‘I look in the mirror and I see...’
Lily was meant to say ‘myself’ but she got a strop on and Brown Owl had to say it
for her.

The instructor invites me to join several other women who are sitting on the floor
in a circle, holding babies on their laps.

‘Who’s Me-signing today?’ the instructor asks, and she introduces each child by

singing their name and making a gesture with her hands that corresponds to its rhythm. The adults repeat her actions and words.

'Have we got Mar-cel?' the instructor sings, and she makes the shape of a letter 'M' by lifting her elbows and inverting her hands, touching her fingertips together. The other mothers sing Marcel's name and copy the instructor's gesture.

I am so busy learning everyone's names and gestures I forget to teach Marcel how to make the signs. There are songs to learn, too – traditional rhymes with some of the words changed:

'Ring a ring of roses, a pocket full of poses, a-tishoo a-tishoo, we all make signs.'

'It's important to interact with your child like this at home,' the instructor says. 'So you can teach them the new signs we're learning each week and so you can better understand what your babies are trying to communicate.'

After half an hour of singing and signing she announces a break and the women gather their children and get to their feet, moving over to a serving hatch where coffee is being served from the adjoining kitchen. Only one other woman and I remain on the mat. She wears a headscarf and her baby is called Jasmine.

'No coffee for you?'

Jasmine's mother gestures at the queue. She and I sit in silence watching the crowd of other women laughing and chatting until it is time to resume signing.

During the second half of the session, the instructor works with a hand puppet.

'Birdy says wel-come Mar-cel!'

'Birdy' has goggly eyes, yellow feathers and an orange plastic beak. Marcel tenses in my lap and shrinks away from the creature. I hold him close while the instructor

jabs the air around us. ‘Silly Birdy’ I whisper to him when she moves away.

He falls asleep in his buggy on our way home and stays asleep even after I bump the buggy up the steps and bang the front door shut.

‘Home again, home again, jiggety jig!’ I sing, in the style of the signing instructor, but he still doesn’t wake up. His eyes are closed, lips gently parted. His breath is barely detectable, even when I hold my ear next to his mouth. I whisper one of Lily’s Shakespeare quotes in his ear:

‘This feather stirs, she lives!’

While he sleeps I roam the house poking in corners and idly looking through drawers. I try on Nikki’s coat. There is a packet of chewing gum in the pocket. I take one and chew it noisily like a teenager, watching myself in the hallway mirror.

In the old-fashioned writing desk in the living room I find neat stacks of stationery - brown wages envelopes like the one my money comes in, white envelopes and notepads of all shapes and sizes. I flick through the pages of one of the notepads. The paper is good quality, cream-smooth on one side, slightly rougher and faintly ridged on the other, the kind of paper someone might use to write a love letter or an invitation. I take a silver pencil out of a pot of pens and pencils. It has a rubber in the end, like a small pink teat, and is surprisingly heavy.

‘Surprisingly heavy,’ I say out loud, weighing it in my hand.

When I twist the nib, the lead of the pencil extends. I write Marcel’s name on the creamy paper.

Marcel.

I write John and Lily’s names.

I rub out the names but their imprint remains. I tear out the page and fold it, put it in my back pocket.

The 16.40 slows to a halt behind the house, its brakes hissing and squeaking.

I twist the nib of the pencil, extending the delicate lead until it snaps.

* * *

I find excuses to go to the shop in the hope I will bump into my neighbour. I haven't seen him since our trip to the animal rescue centre. One evening I am rewarded - I am standing at the till when I sense him behind me but I don't look round and at first he doesn't say anything. I can't help glancing at him as I am about to leave.

'Hello you,' he says.

'Oh! I didn't see you there!'

He knows it's not true.

'Dessert?' he says, eyeing the tin of custard in my hands.

'Always.'

'And there's me with just biscuits,' he says, showing me the packet of Fox's Fingers he is holding.

He is very good-looking. I like the way his grey hair shows up the blue of his eyes. I think I will call him Silver Fox.

'Wait for me,' he says, 'I want to show you something.'

Sameer hands him his change while I wait at the open door. Outside the shop, he picks a free local paper out of the wire rack and shows me an advert he has seen for an Open Day at the animal rescue centre.

‘We could go if you like,’ he says.

‘They’d only show us any old squirrel and tell us it’s ours.’

‘I guess... Okay, then.’

Later, when I am smoking out of my bedroom window, I can see him ironing in his bedroom. He hasn’t closed his curtains, even though it is late. If he looked up he would see me but he doesn’t look up. His arm sweeps from side to side, gliding the iron over a shirt. If he looked up I might wave but he keeps his head bowed over the ironing board. I wave anyway and then I stub out my cigarette, let myself out of the flat and cross the road in my bare feet.

‘Were you ironing?’ I ask when he answers the door.

‘I was.’

‘I could see you.’

He looks me up and down – there is no need for him to undress me with his eyes because I’m not dressed, I am in my nightie.

‘I feel bad for crushing your dreams,’ I say.

‘My dreams?’

‘About going to see our squirrel.’

He takes my hand and pulls me gently across the threshold. He shuts the door with a click and kisses me. In the freshly painted hallway we press our bodies together, one against the other.

* * *

In the free newspaper there is also an advert for a city farm. They have a lambing pen that is open to the public and I ask Nikki if it would be ok for me to take Marcel.

‘Of course,’ she says. ‘He loves animals.’

I trundle his buggy up and down wooden walkways between pens. Several ewes have given birth and lambs only a few hours old lie damply in the straw.

My phone pings. It is a text from the silver fox.

I had fun last night x

Then another message follows.

How bout you?

I text back.

I had fun too x

One ewe in a corner pen is making a lot of noise.

‘See a baby being born?’ I ask Marcel and I wheel his buggy over to where a mother sheep is in the final stages of labour. Her sulphurous orange eyes stare wildly and she throws back her head to tear the air with a terrible shriek.

'mmmmeeeeeeaaahh!'

Marcel bursts into tears but with the mother's yell a moist yellow lamb, slithery with amnion, spills onto the straw.

'Look, Marcel! Baby sheep!' I say, but he is inconsolable and I have to take him over to the other side of the barn. I park the buggy next to an enclosure of older lambs.

Me at city farm x

Nice x

My phone pings with a donkey emoji. I send one of a sheep.

Marcel and I check on the ewe. She is quiet now, and motionless, as is her lamb, which is underneath her, with just its knobbly yellow back showing. I'm worried it will suffocate.

'A mother over there is sitting on her baby,' I tell one of the farm workers. 'Is that ok?'

The farm worker is a young woman with a mean face. She tells me the lamb is fine. Marcel and I return to our vigil. When the lamb bleats from underneath its mother its raucous sound makes us jump. The mother sheep shifts her great weight and begins to clean her baby of the yellow gunk that covers its body. Fox sends an emoji of a cute penguin. I send him a steaming turd.

* * *

‘What would you say if I had a boyfriend?’ I ask my children.

They are on their devices while I write in the diary I am keeping for Marcel, recording the signing sessions, our trips to the park and city farm.

‘I wouldn’t like it,’ says John, not looking up from his i-Pad.

‘Have you, then?’ Lily asks, studying me.

‘I don’t know.’

She announces she is going to change her name.

‘What’s your new one going to be?’ her brother asks.

‘I was thinking May.’

‘And may we still call you Lily?’ I ask her.

‘You may,’ says my daughter, ‘but I probably won’t answer.’

‘No change there, then,’ I say, and she pulls a face.

John wants to hear the story of how we named him and I tell him once again about the way his father and I talked about him when he was in the womb, calling him ‘John’ as a kind of joke. I tell him that once he was born we couldn’t think of him as anything else so John he became.

The door buzzer goes. I get up to answer it.

‘Too fast!’ John complains. ‘You told it too fast!’

‘It’s me,’ says Fox over the intercom. ‘I texted you.’

‘My phone’s charging.’

‘I could see you in your flat. I was waving.’

‘I didn’t see you.’

‘You weren’t looking.’

‘No.’

There’s a pause.

‘Fancy coming to mine?’

I glance into the living room.

‘Not tonight.’

‘Washing your hair?’

‘Something like that.’

I tell him I’ll come down. When I reach the bottom of the communal stairs he is pressing his face against the glass door, squashing his nose, distorting his features.

‘I just wanted to see you,’ he says when I open the door.

‘And now you have.’

‘Now I have, yes.’

He points his toe over the threshold. Lily would mock him for his trainers.

‘You can’t come up,’ I say.

‘Too soon?’

‘Yes.’

He shushes takeaway leaflets with his foot.

‘And you don’t fancy coming over?’

‘No.’

I try to soften my refusal with ‘thank you but it’s too late. He tells me that’s fair enough and you can’t blame a guy for trying. I watch him cross the road. He glances back

at me when he opens his front door. I wave at him, silhouetted in the bright rectangle of his doorway and he waves back.

I go back upstairs.

‘Mum, can I have hair extensions?’ Lily asks.

‘No.’

‘Loads of girls at school have them.’

‘Why would you want someone else’s dead hair on your head?’

‘All hair is dead hair,’ she tells me.

‘Not while it’s growing out of your head, it isn’t,’ John says.

She picks a strand from her own head and holds it up in front of his face.

‘Dead,’ she says.

Later that evening a pile of belongings materialises outside her bedroom door – a heap of clothes, a jewellery box, the doll’s house we bought her for her birthday and a diary with a tiny gold padlock.

‘What’s all this?’ I ask her.

‘Things I don’t need any more,’ she says.

* * *

I am tucking Marcel into his buggy after a signing class when I spot a poster on the wall calling for childminding volunteers. The image on the poster is a simple line drawing of a baby's face with a squiggle for its hair and a dimple in each cheek.

Jasmine's mother, Ama, is waiting for me so I quickly write the number on the back of my hand with a biro. Ama laughs to see me struggling to get the pen to work on my skin. Her English isn't very good, so our relationship is mostly based on laughing at one another.

We wheel our buggies down to the park and sit side by side on a bench while our babies sleep. We don't talk much, which suits me. Our exchange is limited to a sign language we make up as we go along, yawning and laying our heads on our hands to show how tired we are, rubbing our bellies when we are hungry, tapping our wrists when it is time to leave. She hasn't commented on my tattoo but then again, why would she, she doesn't have the language with which to comment. She hasn't mimed surprise at it, though, and it is quite an unusual tattoo. I'm not sure they have Russian dolls where she comes from. When I want to express surprise that the park isn't busy I exaggeratedly stare around me and wave like the queen. Ama seems to understand, nodding and smiling. I ask her whether she lives with a partner, drawing a house in the air and pointing at Jasmine then conjuring a shadowy figure to sit next to Ama on the bench and lifting my eyebrows in the shape of a question. Eventually she grasps my meaning and is able to communicate that her husband is at work, cooking in a busy restaurant, judging by her mime. When the babies stir, we push them on the swings for a bit and then we say

goodbye and go our separate ways.

The garden is in full sun after lunch so Marcel and I sit on the front steps of the house, on the shady side of the street. He is bigger now and the noises he makes are different, closer to speech, perhaps. He is trying to copy the noises he hears people making around him. I draw a baby's face in chalk on the pavement for him, trying to get him to make a 'b' sound.

'Baby!' I say. 'Ba-by.'

I draw several baby faces but can't seem to capture the beaming joy of the one on the poster at the church hall. Something about the shape of the squiggle I draw for his hair isn't right and the two lines for his dimples are in the wrong place. Over and over I draw it and soon there are several beaming baby faces on the steps leading up to the house. We are drawing a line right to the end of the street and back again when Rob arrives.

'Pinch needed to go,' he says, gesturing with the plastic bag that dangles from his fingers.

He plops the knotted plastic bag on the pavement and sits on the steps with us.

'Scorchio, isn't it?' he says, getting a hanky out of his pocket and wiping his forehead.

He tells us he can't concentrate in this heat, the words won't come. He takes Marcel from me and bounces him on his knee.

'This is the way the gentlemen ride! Trit-trot, trit-trot, trit-trot.'

Marcel chuckles so Rob whooshes him above our heads and holds him there, his little boy's arms and legs splayed like a flying squirrel's. If his daddy let go, Marcel

would bounce down the steps like a rag doll.

‘I like your street art,’ he says, handing his son back to me.

He tiptoes along the line we have drawn in an exaggerated way, like a clown walking a tightrope.

‘Right, playtime’s over,’ he says when he has completed his chalk walk.

He scrabbles his hair with both hands so he looks like a mad professor then smooths it down again with the flat of his palm and whistles to Pinch, who is busy rootling through the neighbour’s recycling boxes.

‘I wish I could spend the day hanging out with you guys,’ he says.

I tell him he’s welcome to hang with us and he asks me if I mean that and tells me I am fun.

‘Is there a man in your life, Bobbi?’ he asks. ‘Anyone special?’

‘No-one special, no.’

‘Shame,’ he says. ‘He doesn’t know what he’s missing.’

He whistles for Pinch once more but the dog has disappeared inside the neighbour’s driveway and he has to go and fetch him. Marcel and I watch them walk away, following the line we have drawn. Then we go indoors, seeking the cool of the house, taking Rob’s bag of dog shit with us.

When I get home, I dig out Lily’s old diary from the pile outside her room. Its pages are empty apart from one date she has decorated with an explosion of hearts and stars (‘My birthday!’) and some Saturdays marked with the word ‘Dad’.

‘Can I have this?’ I ask her.

‘What for?’

‘Writing in.’

She shrugs so I consider it mine. Both kids are floppy with heat. It’s too hot in here, they complain, so I go around the flat opening all the windows but there is no breeze, the weather is stifling. I sit on my bed in my underwear. The phone number I wrote on my hand has nearly rubbed off so I ring it before it disappears altogether. A youth worker answers and when I explain about the poster I saw advertising for childminder volunteers he tells me about the support group he runs for young people who have experienced difficulties. Some of the young people have babies, he says, and he is hoping to find a childminder to look after them while the young people themselves take lessons in life skills.

‘I could do that.’ I say, doodling in Lily’s diary.

‘I’m afraid it’s unpaid.’

‘I don’t mind.’

‘And you’ll need the appropriate clearances, of course.’

‘I’ve got those,’ I tell him, doodling away.

‘Great!’ the youth worker says. ‘My name’s Andy.’

He invites me to the next session. By the time our call is over I have covered the first two days of the year in Lily’s diary with baby faces.

* * *

I buzz the buzzer and a young man opens the door.

‘You must be Bobbi,’ Andy says.

He tells me there’s a dance class just finishing and as he speaks, a tide of little girls in black leotards and tap shoes flows past us. They are only young, perhaps four or five years old, but the force of them pushes me backwards and my body is pressed against the door. I hold out my hand and their neat hairstyles skim my palm.

‘Mind, girls!’ calls one of their mothers.

She apologises to me, rolling her eyes. The dance teacher is packing up her stereo. Taps on her shoes clack as she moves backwards and forwards on the parquet floor, unplugging the machine from the wall socket and gathering up paperwork, stuffing it into a gym bag.

‘Sorry, I’ll be out of your way in a minute,’ she says.

‘No worries,’ Andy says.

He turns to me, pointing out several buckets dotted around the room.

‘Bit of a roof issue,’ he says.

The door buzzer goes and he leaves, returning moments later with a young woman pushing a pram. He unbolts the double doors and I help prop them open so she can wrestle her pram into the space.

‘This is Bobbi - one of our volunteers,’ Andy tells her. ‘Bobbi, this is Keji.’

The young woman wears an old-fashioned skirt and blouse. Her hair is plaited in short braids, parted in sections.

‘Girl or boy? I ask, gesturing inside the pram.

‘A boy. Oladimeji.’

Her voice is very soft.

‘And how old?’

‘He is just four months.’

Keji picks her child out of his pram and I give his booted foot a little tug.

‘Do have your...?’ Andy asks.

Keji and Andy watch me as I dig inside my bag for the child safety and criminal conviction certificates I have brought with me. Then the door buzzer sounds again and Andy takes them with him. He returns with a young woman and her little boy and hands me back my certificates.

‘Who have we got here?’ I ask the boy, shoving my certificates into the back pocket of my jeans.

The boy looks about two years old, with a round face and a mad monk haircut.

‘This is JD’ his mother says.

She wears a black T-shirt and black leggings and bandages up both arms.

‘Hello JD.’

I offer the boy my hand but he squirms out of reach, hiding behind his mother’s legs.

Andy arranges chairs into a circle in the middle of the room and more young people arrive - two skinny young men in grey hoodies and grey tracksuit bottoms and three young women holding babies. One of the women nods at one of the young men and he

follows her across the room to sit next to me. She is small and pale and wears her hair scraped into a high ponytail.

'She's burning up,' the woman says, tugging at her child's doll-sized denim jacket

'It is hot in here,' I say. 'There was a dance class before.'

'That's why it stinks,' she says.

'Sweaty Betty,' I say, and she laughs.

'Yeah! Sweaty Betty is right.'

She unthreads her baby's little arms from the sleeves of the jacket.

'Need a hand?' I ask her.

'Nah, you're alright.'

'Alright, Jade?' the young man says, once the operation is finished. He reaches out to tickle the baby's tummy. She is wearing a pink all-in-one with the words 'Daddy's Girl' written on it. Her skin is so pale that delicate veins are visible at her temple. She has a surprising amount of hair for such a small baby. It is like a doll's hair - a cloud of fine, blonde curls, which look golden under the community centre lights. The young woman passes this dandelion-doll to her partner and folds then re-folds the tiny jacket, smoothing it out on her lap.

Andy wants our attention.

'Thank you for coming,' he says when everyone is seated. 'This is Bobbi. She's here to look after your children if you want her to, while you're in the life skills sessions.'

Some of the young people look at me but mostly they stare at the floor.

'What do we think?' Andy asks. 'Could that be helpful to any of you?'

'Not being funny but they're all kiddy fiddlers,' the mother of 'Daddy's Girl' says.

She looks at me.

'No offence,' she says.

'None taken.'

Her partner bounces their baby vigorously on his knee.

'No way am I handing her over - some of them lot are paedophiles.'

The baby's legs bob up and down with his movements.

'Do remember that anyone working for youth services has clearance,' says Andy, and my fingers float to my certificates, which I am sitting on. I make a show of packing the away into my bag, which I tuck neatly underneath my chair.

'That don't mean nothing,' the young woman says.

She takes her baby from her partner and stands, then begins to pace the room.

'I 'ain't got time for these fuckers who hand their kids over at the drop of a hat,' she says. 'Why'd they go and have a kid if all they want to do is get rid of it?'

It's difficult to tell how old she is but my guess is that she is sixteen or seventeen. The other young people follow her with their eyes as she walks up and down in the middle of the circle. It is impressive, the way she holds everyone's attention. The only person who won't look at her is her boyfriend, who stares at the floor.

'Hey, Andy!' she says. 'Did Connor tell you he landed a job?'

'Did you Connor? That's excellent.'

'Well dodgy, if you ask me,' says his girlfriend. 'Unpacking lorries at some random warehouse. Still, make a change from playing the X-Box all night won't it.'

'Biggest kids of all, aren't they,' says the woman with bandaged arms. She shouts at her little boy who is busy paddling his hands in one of the buckets dotted around the

room.

‘JD! Dirty!’

Andy wants to get back to the issue of childcare. It might be something to consider, he says, if you young people get jobs.

‘I got a job,’ says the young woman with the ponytail, and she gives a shrug to indicate the little body humped over her shoulder. ‘She's my job. I'm her mum. That's my job.’

‘What if you wanted to go out to work?’ Her boyfriend asks, and the young woman falters for a moment. Standing still in the middle of the circle of chairs she concedes that yes, she could see that there might be a time when she would need childcare. Andy nods encouragingly.

‘And what kind of thing would you want to know about the care on offer?’ he asks.

‘I'd wanna know if she was going to be safe,’ she replies.

* * *

The room is dark and the air is thick with a sweet, rancid smell. Mum is curled on one side in her bed. She is panting - faint, shallow gasps. Little Legs has been banished to the other room where he lies on his special rug next to Mum's empty chair.

'The doctor's been,' Jacqui says. 'I didn't know if you'd want a priest?'

I shake my head.

'Her life's in His Hands now,' Jacqui says. 'I'll leave you to say goodbye.'

She bustles out of the room, whispering 'God Bless' as she goes.

I sit on the bed and take Mum's hand. It is cool to touch, its yellowish skin stretched thinly over the bones. It grows cooler in mine as I massage her knuckles, like worry beads or a rosary. Soon the birds are waking up and light is seeping in from the corners of the sky. There has been a night but I didn't notice its passing.

'I hope you haven't been playing that all night,' I say to John when I get home.

He ignores me and on the TV at the foot of his bed a zombie advances, eyes bulging. John's hands fidget the controller and on the screen he angles his weapon. The volume is turned down because he knows I can't stand the noise. The only sound in the room is the clickety clack of his thumbs on the controller.

'Nan died,' I say.

John blasts another zombie. It evaporates in a spray of gore then springs mercilessly back to life.

'Did you hear what I said?'

He switches off the television and pats the bed next to him like I used to pat mine

when he was little. I climb in and lie down, close my eyes.

‘Poor Nan,’ he says.

His duvet smells of hay.

‘Will I have to wear a suit?’

‘What?’

‘To her funeral?’

Somewhere outside a bird is singing.

‘I wish you’d read a book instead of playing those horrible games,’ I say.

‘I don’t like books.’

After a short while there is movement in the bed as he stretches across me to reach for something on the floor.

‘Black holes distort the space around them, sucking up matter and creating a vacuum. The gravitational pull in a black hole is so great nothing can enter it, nothing can escape it, not even light.’

Without opening my eyes I know he is reading from the encyclopaedia of space that his dad gave him.

‘During the death of a star, it grows and grows until it's enormous, then there's a massive explosion during which the star becomes as bright as a hundred million suns and all that's left is a black hole.’

‘Well that’s cheered me up no end,’ I say, opening my eyes.

‘Dad says half the atoms in our bodies are made outside the Milky Way.’

‘Don’t believe everything Dad says.’

He holds out a hand, turning it over, examining it, musing on the fact that bits of

him have been blasted out of a different galaxy.

‘All this talk of Galaxies and Milky Ways is making me peckish,’ I say. ‘Will you go to the shop?’

He ignores me, returning to his book and reading aloud about the absence at the centre of our universe. Then he lays the encyclopaedia aside and is quiet for a while.

‘If you think about it, words are meaningless,’ he says at last. ‘What do they even mean? They’re just words to say what we don’t really know.’

I think about Jacqui and her religious faith and I close my eyes once more.

‘Don’t let me fall asleep,’ I say. ‘I have to be at work in a few hours.’

‘Words don't really matter, do they?’ he says.

‘Matter doesn't matter,’ I reply, sinking into sleep.

I wake up late for my shift with Marcel.

‘No worries,’ Rob says when I phone to apologise. ‘I’m in no hurry to get to work.’

I catch a cab.

‘Whose are the flowers?’ I ask the driver as we pull up outside.

Several bunches of flowers rest against a lamppost. The driver answers with a shrug. He doesn’t know. He stares at the 4x4s in the driveways and the ornamental trees in pots as I fumble in my purse for his fare.

‘You made it!’ Rob says when he opens the door.

I hang my bag on the banister and we head down to the kitchen where Marcel is waiting in his highchair. He kicks his feet excitedly when he sees me.

‘Hello, my beauty,’ I whisper, and he lifts his gaping mouth to mine.

His breath is warm and sweet, his cheek soft as suede.

Rob’s laptop is open on the table. He snaps it shut and puts on a crumpled linen jacket from the back of his chair.

‘I’ll be off, then,’ he says, rubbing his hair in the distinctive way he has, scrabbling it vigorously and smoothing it behind his ears.

‘Uuh, uuh,’ Marcel says, and I pluck him out of his highchair.

Rob whistles for the dog and all of us go upstairs, Pinch pushing eagerly ahead, thwacking me with his tail as he rushes past. Rob opens the front door and when he bends to kiss Marcel goodbye he hesitates slightly, as if he might kiss me, too.

‘Whose are the flowers?’ I ask.

Rob glances across the street and tells me a young boy crashed his motorbike, smashed his head in. A thick smell of diesel wafts into the house on the warm breeze and I feel faint.

‘Are you alright, Bobbi?’

‘Sorry... I feel a bit –’

He takes Marcel and makes me sit on the stairs.

‘I’m ok...’

‘You’re not going to swoon on me?’

From the station, the brakes of a train let out a high-pitched wheeze.

‘My mum died last night. I’m a bit... I didn’t get much sleep.’

‘Oh no, Bobbi! Why didn’t you say?’

‘It’s alright – it wasn’t unexpected.’

‘All the same, that’s massive. You don’t need to be here - we can cope.’

‘No, really, I want to – this is where I want to be.’

I hold out my arms for Marcel but Rob insists I take the day off.

‘We’ll pay you,’ he says, going into the living room and returning with the money

Nikki has left for me in one of the old-fashioned wages envelopes.

‘Call it compassionate leave,’ Rob says.

He shuts the door after me and I cross the road to read the messages written in the cards attached to the motorbike boy’s flowers. *Forever in our hearts.*

* * *

Fox says he can't reach me.

'But I only live across the road,' I say.

'You won't let me in,' he says. 'You're a closed shop.'

We are at his, in bed as usual. Or rather, I am in bed and Fox stands in the doorway, naked. In the bathroom, the taps are running.

'I've never seen inside your flat.'

'Not much to see.'

'You've told me so little about you.'

'Nothing to tell.'

He raises an eyebrow at me, as if to say he thinks otherwise. I ask him to teach me how to do it.

'How to do what?'

'One at a time – look, I can only do both.'

I lay in bed raising and lowering my eyebrows at him.

'Stop trying to change the subject.'

I lift the duvet, inviting him back to bed but he stays where he is.

'That won't work either,' he says.

'Are you sure?'

The smell of our bodies rises up from under the bedclothes. Fox fixes me with his blue eyes. and after a few moments he leaves the room, calling me from the bathroom to come and join him.

‘Let’s go on a date,’ he says. ‘A proper date.’

We are in the bath now. He has the end with the taps.

‘Where do you want to go?’

‘Somewhere people go on dates. The cinema? A restaurant? I could take you out for dinner.’

He stares at his penis which floats gently in the water.

‘You can tell me anything,’ he says.

I stare too. He knows something. Someone has talked. One of our neighbours. It’s too hot in the bath. I get out and stand dripping on the bathroom mat.

‘My mum died.’

Fox looks at me. She died, I tell him. It wasn’t unexpected but if I seem distant, that could be why.

‘You should have said something.’

‘I am saying something.’

‘Sorry if I was pushy,’ he says.

He runs the cold tap, cupping water in his hands and sluicing it over his face.

‘You don’t need to apologise,’ I say.

I sit on the toilet. The hot water has relaxed my sphincter but if I go home to use the toilet, he will accuse me of holding back, of being unreachable. I flick through one of the wildlife magazines he keeps on the windowsill.

‘Listen to this,’ I say, and I read aloud from an article about two dolphins.

‘When their trainer makes the sign for ‘tandem’ they communicate with one another to agree on which stunt they will perform.’

‘Maybe they’re not communicating,’ Fox suggests. ‘Maybe they’re just really fast at imitating each other – so fast that humans can’t detect it.’

I ask him if he is a scientist now and he tells me no, he read the article, that’s all.

‘Dolphins are incredibly social animals,’ he says. ‘A dolphin on its own isn’t a real dolphin.’

‘Who wants to be real?’ I ask him.

‘Don’t you?’

‘Just real enough.’

‘How real is real enough?’

‘This real,’ I say, as my bowels empty.

He can’t help a look of disgust flicker across his face. This is what happens when I don’t hold back.

* * *

Lily's diary is filling up. I have written about Mum's dying and about Fox's wanting.

It all gets written down, even his floating penis.

I write about Andy arranging for the young people to do a pottery-making workshop as part of their life skills project.

'What's pottery got to do with life?' One of the young men in tracksuit bottoms asks.

'Creativity is important,' Andy tells him.

'Fuck that,' says the young man, untying the laces on his trainers and retying them.

'We're just asking you to give it a go,' Andy says.

He fetches some plastic sheeting out of a cupboard and asks for help bringing in some tables from another room. JD's mother and Connor carry a table between them. Her arms aren't bandaged tonight, revealing the bloodied dashes which score them from wrist to elbow.

'Alright?' Connor says to her as they set the table down.

'Alright,' she replies, and she stretches her arms out in front of her, palms upwards, blowing on the scabs, as if to cool them.

Connor's ponytailed girlfriend Kim jiggles their baby on her lap. She doesn't take her eyes off Connor.

While his mother is helping to prepare the room, JD fits shapes into the holes in

the top of a toy post-box. The toy belongs to the community centre and black felt-tipped letters denote it as community centre property. Most of its shapes are missing and the colour of the post-box has rubbed off so it is pale pink instead of pillar-box red.

Soon everyone is seated behind tables laid out with plasticine and clay. JD goes to sit next to his mother, Nat, who is stirring a mixture of plaster of paris and water.

‘The idea is to have fun,’ Andy says. ‘Have fun!’

Some of the young people attack the materials straightaway, rolling long sausages out of Plasticine and holding them against their bodies, swinging them from side to side like enormous dangling penises but others cry out to Andy ‘this is boring’ and ‘what are we meant to do?’ The young women complain their nails will get dirty.

I ask Kim if she would like me to hold Jade and she tells me to be her guest. She passes me her child and shakes her empty arms.

‘Cor, that’s better!’ she says, turning to Connor with a grin that lights up her face. ‘Right, where we goin’?’

He gives his Plasticine penis a vigorous whirl which sends the end of it flying across the room.

‘You bell end!’

JD is up off his seat once more, racing Connor to snatch up the stray body part which he gives to his mother. Nat eyeballs Connor as she squishes the plasticine in her fist.

Jade fits neatly in the crook of my arm. She is warm with the heat of her mother’s body. I stroke the veins showing through the skin at her temples and Kim catches me.

‘Weird them, aren’t they?’ she says. ‘Doctor says they’re normal, reckons they’ll

go when she's bigger.'

'She's gorgeous,' I say.

When I stroke Jade's sticky little palms she flexes her fingers and curls them around mine.

'Love it when they do that,' Kim says, studiously ignoring Connor and Nat.

'Me too.'

While Andy spends time at each table, asking the young people what they want to make and offering suggestions, I walk Jade around the space.

'Watch how they're showing each other their work and taking it in turns to look after each other's babies,' Andy whispers to me when Jade and I have completed our rounds. 'Wonderful.'

Kim says she is making a doll of Connor so she can stick pins in it if he fucks her over. By the time the session is over, their baby is asleep in my arms. Kim checks to see if she still has hold of my finger – she does, and Connor tells me I've got the magic touch. Kim takes Jade from me and tucks her into her pram which is lined with a lacy pink cushion decorated with miniature bows and gold applique unicorns.

'What a beautiful cushion,' I whisper as Kim lays her gently on top of it, fluffing out the lace around her head so she looks like Thumbelina asleep in a flower.

'Connor's sister gave it to her, didn't she,' Kim says.

Keji's baby is asleep too. I hold the door open while the young women wheel their children out of the building.

'Well that was a success,' Andy says as he and I begin to tidy up the room.

We are sweeping bits of plasticine and clay from under the tables when there is a

tapping on the window. Connor ducks out of sight when Andy looks up but he signals that he wants to speak to me. I go outside to the car park where he and Kim are waiting.

‘We're looking for someone to have Jade so we can have a night out,’ he says.

‘I thought you weren’t keen, Kim?’ I say. ‘Last week you said –‘

‘That was last week,’ he says. ‘She changes her mind like the wind, this one.’

‘If you need someone I'd be happy to babysit,’ I tell them.

‘Have her at yours?’ Kim asks.

‘If you like.’

‘It'll cost us though,’ Connor says.

‘I'd do it for free.’

‘Legend!’

I tell them not to mention it to Andy – something tells me he wouldn’t approve.

‘Free country,’ Connor says. ‘She’s our kid, it’s up to us who looks after her.’

I give them my address and we arrange for them to bring Jade the following Saturday. I watch them wheel her away in her pram and then I go back inside where Andy is laying out the pottery shapes on sheets of newspaper.

‘Look at this,’ he says.

He shows me what Kim has made - a small clay baby and a cradle for it to sleep in.

* * *

Jacqui telephones. She needs me to empty Mum's flat. She has another occupant waiting. When I arrive, Mum's name has already gone from the doorbell. The windows in all the rooms are open and a breeze whisks through the place.

I sit in Mum's chair to drink the coffee Jacqui makes me. A cleaning trolley containing cleaning equipment stands in the middle of the room.

'She enjoyed living here,' I say. 'Thank you for all you did for her, Jacqui.'

'You're most welcome. Mary was a wonderful woman.'

She stands with her rubber gloved hands on her hips, making a mental note of all the jobs she wants to tick off. Little Legs pads around the place looking for someone who isn't here.

'She's no place you'll find her,' Jacqui tells him.

'I'd like you to have something of hers,' I say, looking at Little Legs.

Jacqui looks at him too. She has been feeding and walking him since Mum died.

'A piece of jewellery or some kind of keepsake, you mean?' she says.

Jacqui takes off her rubber gloves to go through Mum's treasures with me. I show her a brooch in the shape of a book, a souvenir of the Lake District where we went camping a few times. Its pages are made from real paper, each featuring a scenic photograph. They unfold like a concertina. Jacqui and I look through the miniature photographs.

'I've never been,' she says. 'It looks nice.'

'If you wear this the Lake District goes where you go.'

Jacqui bursts into song. 'I've been to Paradise but I've never been to me!'

The catch on the brooch is weak so the covers of the book can't contain its tiny pages and they spill out. Jacqui chooses a gold cross on a gold chain instead. She puts it on straightaway and then she puts her rubber gloves back on and fills her bucket with hot water. She wants to make a start on the bedroom.

Fox is pleased when I ask him to help me move Mum's bits and pieces. I have arranged for most of the furniture to be collected by a house clearance guy Jacqui recommends but I want to keep the dining table she never used and some crockery she did.

And then there is Little Legs.

'Funny little guy, isn't he?' Fox says. 'What kind of dog is he?'

'The loving kind,' I say.

It feels exposing to take Fox inside her flat – the place looks shabby and Little Legs is kind of odd-looking. It takes us a while to manoeuvre the table into the van. Afterwards, we carry boxes and bin-bags outside and arrange them on the forecourt. It is bright and windy and a pub sign further along the road creaks as it swings back and forth. Something in the strong breeze and the quality of light takes me back to my childhood. I stand with my mother's possessions gathered around my legs and I am ten years old in the Lake District with her and Dad unpacking the car around me. The tent in its bag, our clothes in holdalls, food supplies and cooking equipment in cardboard boxes - a miniature version of our life packed into the boot to be unpacked and re-located to a field

somewhere. A sign creaks in the wind and the sun is in my eyes, Dad is shouting at me not to stand there like an idiot and Mum is busying herself so he doesn't get annoyed. Maybe some of the very same items are in the bags and boxes here on the pavement. The catch on my mother's souvenir brooch has come unfastened and the book unfolds concertina-like down my body. I re-fold its pages and tuck them inside, re-fasten the catch.

'This lot for taking?' says a voice.

The House Clearance guy is here. Fox tells him yes this lot is for taking and the House Clearance guy swings a bin bag over each shoulder and slings them into the back of his van. Another man emerges from the vehicle. He is sorry for Fox's loss. Fox thanks him without telling him the loss is mine. This second man casts an eye over Mum's belongings.

'Looks like you've got some nice bits here,' he says.

One of Mum's neighbours passes slowly along the street pushing a wheeled shopping trolley with a tartan cover. Mum used to call her The Duchess on account of her weekly trip to a hairdresser instead of using the mobile service that visited residents in their homes. The Duchess pauses on her journey and points at Mum's armchair.

'Is that going begging?' she asks.

The seat cushion bears the imprint of my mother's body.

'It's spoken for,' says the first House Clearance guy as he and his partner lift a chest of drawers into their van.

'I could do with a chair like that,' says the old woman.

'You can have it,' I say, but she has continued on her way and can't hear me. She

is startled when I tap her on the shoulder.

'You can have the chair,' I say.

I have to repeat myself several times.

'It's yours,' I say, mouthing my words exaggeratedly so she can lip-read.

Her face brightens and for a moment she looks eight instead of eighty. Fox and I lug Mum's chair back along the street.

'Where are you taking it?' asks one of the House Clearance men. 'That's a good chair that is – it's the best piece.'

'I've found a home for it,' I tell them.

'It was promised to us,' the man says.

'What are you going to do with it?' Fox asks.

'We'd find it a good home,' the man says.

'We've found it a good home,' Fox says.

'We'd give it to someone who really needs it.'

'We're giving it to someone who needs it.'

'It's a good piece, that is,' says the man forlornly.

Fox and I go back inside Mum's flat where Little Legs is lying in his bed. He is the only living thing in the flat. He is the only thing in the flat. I gather up his bed with him still in it and carry him to Fox's campervan.

'Want to take a few moments?' Fox asks but I tell him I've had enough moments and he nods and starts the engine. We drive back across town and outside my building he waits while I take Little Legs up to my flat to introduce him to his new home. I need help getting Mum's table up the stairs, though. We wedge open the communal door with

takeaway leaflets and a telephone directory and we tip the table onto its side to carry it between us

‘Who uses a telephone directory these days?’ I ask, and I talk for the sake of talking – about telephone directories and about the best Indian takeaways, about anything and everything all the way up the stairs so I am panting by the time we reach the front door of my flat. Fox waits while I get out my key then slides the table forward a few inches.

‘I don’t want to scratch it...’ he says, gesturing for me to take the other end.

We carry the table carefully inside. Fox tries to hide the quick looks he darts around the place, trying not to be intrusive on this first visit to my home. I wonder how much he knows. Someone has talked.

We back the table into the living room doorway so he can squeeze around it to get into the kitchen. He does a double-take when he sees the tins of custard crowding the shelves and surfaces.

‘I guess you like custard?’ he says.

‘Love the stuff.’

‘Me too.’

He removes the fruit bowl, putting it on the draining board and lifting the flimsy old Formica table out of the room. I park it in the hallway next to the pile of Lily’s things outside her door. I can sense Fox trying to work out the geography of the flat, trying to assess which room is mine.

‘It looks good,’ Fox says, when Mum’s table is in position.

It looks ridiculous. The polished dark wood is out of place in my scruffy kitchen.

It was out of place in Mum's flat too, which is why she never used it. I pull up one of my cheap dining chairs and sit on it, spreading my palms on the table's smooth, shiny surface. Fox draws up a chair at the opposite end.

'Dinner?'

'Not yet.'

'Custard?'

I shake my head.

'But maybe one day? A guy can dream?'

His eyes are as blue as a swimming pool.

'Bobbi...' he says.

'I'm not ready.'

I escort him down to the entrance of our building and we kiss before he crosses the road to his house. Little Legs, acting as chaperone, follows us and now he hops back up the stairs with me, claws clicking.

* * *

‘You’re sure it’s not too soon?’ Nikki asks when I phone to say I am ready to come back to work.

‘Positive,’ I say. ‘Spending time with Marcel is the best cure.’

I run there, and I am sweating by the time I arrive. I can’t help banging noisily on the door, as if my need is urgent, which it is. Marcel seems pleased to see me, smacking my face and pulling my hair when Nikki passes him into my arms.

‘Gentle! Gentle!’ she tells him and she takes him back from me.

‘Watch this,’ she says.

She places him on the kitchen floor and he twists his little body around and tips himself onto all fours, scampering eagerly away.

‘He’s on the move!’

‘He thinks he’s a dog,’ Nikki says, as Marcel heads towards Pinch’s food bowls. Pinch comes out from underneath the table, herding him away like a sheep dog.

‘Soon he’ll be walking and talking,’ I say.

‘Oh, and there’s another thing,’ Nikki says.

She places both hands on her belly and looks at me.

‘Sooner than we planned,’ she says.

I stare at her slender brown fingers which rest lightly on the round of her stomach.

‘Congratulations.’

‘Thanks. We were going to wait but, well... What’s the gap between yours?’

Unbreachable, I want to tell her. The gap between my children is one that cannot

be breached.

‘Three years,’ I say.

‘Oh, quite a big gap,’ she

‘Quite big, yes.’

Once she has left I whizz Marcel fast down the hill in his buggy. Eeeeeeeeyyy!

Little Legs needs walking and Marcel loves dogs. Also, he will be interested to see where I live. It’s a change of scenery for him.

‘When the new baby comes they won’t want you any more,’ I tell him. ‘You’ll have to come and live with me.’

I key in the door-code and wonder if Fox is home and if he is watching me from his window. I bump Marcel’s buggy up the stairs with him in it, counting each step out loud. When I open the door, Little Legs is there to greet us.

‘Look, Marcel! Look what tiny legs he’s got!’

It feels strange to have him in my territory, seeing what he makes of the sights and smells. He is unimpressed by Little Legs so I show him Lily’s doll’s house but he crawls off to investigate the kitchen. I follow him on all fours for a Marcel-eye view and he thinks I am chasing him. I let out a ferocious growl and he moves fast, squiggling his way under Mum’s table to get away from me. He watches me from underneath it, excited and nervous at the same time. I take oranges from the fruit bowl and roll them to him across the sticky floor.

My home must feel like a doll’s house to him, being so much smaller than the one he is used to. When I coax him out from under the table I show him my bedroom. We bat the dreamcatcher hanging from the ceiling and blow its feathers but Marcel is too

sophisticated for such play now and squirms to be released. After a tour of the living room I fetch poo bags and lead and the three of us trek back across town to the park.

Dogs aren't allowed in the playground so I park the buggy next to a bench on the path and I sit Marcel on my lap to watch Little Legs sniff among the flowerbeds. A man in dark clothes emerges from one of the tents pitched in the bushes. He ambles over to us and I wrap my arms tighter around Marcel. Little Legs sniffs at the frayed hems of the man's trousers.

'What a gent,' the man says. 'What an absolute gent.'

He asks what his name is.

'He's called Little Legs.'

The man has three tears tattooed next to one eye. John once told me a teardrop tattoo means the person has killed someone and this man, sinewy and tanned, looks capable of such a deed.

'Ha! I've only got little legs too, mate!' he says. 'Look at them!'

He dances a few steps.

'Jack Russell?

'Sorry?

'Reckon he's got a bit of Jack Russell in him, that one, and a bit of sausage dog, too.'

'You might be right.'

'Talking of sausages, money for a cup of tea?'

I give him a pound coin.

'Tea's one fifty,' he says.

I give him another coin and he wanders off. Little Legs follows him along the path until I whistle and he comes back.

After the park we head back to Marcel's. I can barely get inside the door because an enormous double buggy, wrapped in clear plastic, fills the hallway.

'I went shopping,' Nikki says.

It is a struggle to get Marcel's buggy inside so she hauls her new purchase into the living room out of the way. She is excited by its mono and duo variations, with expandable carrycot and seat-facing-world options. We remove the wrapping and Nikki invites me to hold its leatherette handlebar and pinch its air tyres.

She wants to know what Marcel thinks of his new chariot so we sit him in it but Marcel has only just got out of a buggy, he doesn't want to be strapped into another one. He starts to complain, writhing and arching his back. Nikki gets him out again and sets him down on the floor among packaging printed with warnings to keep away from young babies and animals.

She asks if I would mind helping her clear the cupboard under the stairs. Feeling queasy, she has taken the day off work so Marcel and I won't be by ourselves and I am to be set to work. He weaves around my feet with Pinch, who sniffs among the tennis rackets and camping equipment I pull out of the cupboard. Nikki makes herself a cup of ginger tea and drinks it on the patio where she can supervise Marcel and stop him eating the plants.

It takes me an hour to clear enough space for the new buggy. When I have finished, I wheel it into the cupboard and Nikki comes to inspect my labour. We stand side by side and stare at the two empty seats.

‘It feels weird,’ she says. ‘Knowing Marcel will be in one half and not knowing who will go in the other... Knowing there will be someone to fill the space but not knowing who it is.’

She places her hands on her belly and I think how adorable Jade would look sitting next to Marcel in the posh new buggy.

‘I kind of want a girl’ Nikki says. ‘It would be nice, wouldn’t it?’

She shakes her head, quickly brushing away tears.

‘Oh dear, bit hormonal,’ she says.

* * *

On Saturday, Kim arrives punctually at six o'clock. Jade is crying.

'Hungry,' Kim says. 'She's due a bottle.'

She wheels her pram into the foyer and we take Jade out. Her cries echo in the stairwell. Kim hugs her tight, bouncing her up and down and shushing her while I bump the pram up the stairs. The woman across the landing comes out of her flat.

'It's alright, she won't keep you awake, she don't cry at night,' Kim tells her.

'You can't leave the pram on the landing, it's a fire hazard,' the woman says.

'I'm taking it in,' I say, and the woman goes back inside her flat.

'I'll give her fire hazard,' Kim says.

Little Legs comes to the door to greet our guests.

'Alright with kids, is he?' Kim asks, bending down to let him smell her hand.

'He's fine. Hardly a pit bull, is he?'

Kim laughs.

She sits at my mother's table to feed Jade her bottle and I sit next to her. Jade's little hand waves in the air, like a sea creature wafting in a current. I give her my hand and she wraps her fingers around mine. All three of us are connected, four if you count Mum, who used to polish the table we sit at until she could see her face in it.

'Nice place you've got,' Kim says, looking around as if she is casing the joint.

'Better than my shithole.'

Jade's eyes gaze around the room like her mother's.

'What's with all the custard?' Kim asks.

‘I’m going through a custard phase, that’s all.’

‘Nothing wrong with custard,’ Kim says.

‘Would you like a drink?’

‘What have you got?’

‘Tea? Coffee?’

‘Nah, you’re alright.’

We wait for Jade to finish feeding. Afterwards, Kim holds her over her shoulder to wind her and I bend close, whispering nonsense about unicorns while we wait for her dainty burp. Kim laughs at my stories and tells me I’m mad.

‘Not the full ticket, is she Jade?’ she says, kissing her child and handing her to me.

‘Loves her bath and she loves reading,’ she says, talking me through Jade’s bedtime routine. ‘She’s even got a book you can read in the bath – I packed it in her bag.’

She shows me the contents of the bag.

‘Bottles and milk, look. Clothes for tomorrow, clean nap-naps for her bum-bum.’

She holds up a tiny pair of trainers.

‘How cute are these? Connor got them for her but they’re a bit big.’

She puts the shoes back and gets out a pink elasticated headband with a pink flower which she pulls over Jade’s curls before stashing the bag under the pram. As we move to the door she glances at a framed photograph of John and Lily but doesn’t say anything. She kisses Jade, telling her to be good. When she has gone I take Jade into my bedroom and we stand at the window watching the sunset.

‘Red sky at night,’ I say, and I explain to Jade something John once told me,

which is that that shepherds' delight is a result of pollution in the air. The unicorn cushion in her pram is a bit grubby and smells of fags so I take off her things and put them all in the washing machine, singing as I go. I lay her on a folded towel on the bathroom floor and sing her a song about Jade going Jogging in her Jeggings while I run a bath.

'Off comes Bobbi's top - peek-abo!'

She blinks with astonishment at my naked body. I show her my tattoo, tracing its outline and telling her about the smaller dolls inside her, telling her about the plan I have for Lily and John to have matching tattoos of their own, if they want them, of course.

'Lily's would be slightly bigger, on her forearm,' I say, showing Jade on my own body what I mean, 'and John could have an even bigger one, on his bicep, maybe – then when we hold them next to each other they'll make a family of dolls.'

She studies me closely, looking from my tattoo to my face and back to my tattoo again, reaching out to touch it with her tiny doll fingers. I tell her about all the ladies in the world that she could grow up to be and she understands everything. Maybe she'll have a tattoo one day.

The water is womb temperature and we are like twins, the little one contained within the bigger one. Jade likes the noise the water makes when I fill an empty shampoo bottle and hold it up high, pouring out its contents. I hold the bottle higher then lower and we listen to the different notes, thundering when there is a gush, petering out to a tinkle as the container empties. I pour the water over her head and it straightens out her curls. She looks quite different with her hair long and wet, gathering like seaweed on her mermaid shoulders.

After our bath, we lay wrapped in towels on my bed under the dreamcatcher. With her small face peeking out, she looks like an Inuit baby or a little nun. I scroll through images of gemstones on John's i-Pad, showing her pictures of jade. Some pieces are pale and cloudy like milk, others are as glassy and bright as boiled sweets. I pluck at these bright images and bring my fingers to my mouth, smacking my lips loudly, pretending to eat them.

'Sweeties! Yum yum!' I say.

Jade lets out a laugh. It's not often that she makes a noise – she rarely cries and I haven't heard her laugh before, so I do it again and again until she decides it's not funny any more.

Some of the jade has been carved into faces, of laughing Buddha, of stern Chinese emperors, of a Mayan God who visits earth in the form of a parrot and whose job it is to bring up the sun every morning and take it down again every night.

'Time for beddy-byes,' I tell her.

The sky is dark now and there are lights on in Fox's house. I send him a text:

Look who I've got x

He comes to his bedroom window. I waggle Jade's little hand at him and he waves back. While I feed her a bottle I tell her a story about a golden-haired princess whose father boasts she can spin gold. I put her in my bed and I am the last thing she sees as she falls asleep.

I am woken a few hours later by a buzzing on the intercom. I stagger into the

hallway to answer it.

'Bobbi! It's Kim and Connor! Let us up.'

'What time is it?'

'Let us up, can you?'

I buzz them in and I can hear them on the stairs, swearing and shushing. Little Legs click-clacks to the front door of the flat and we poke our heads out, watching as they wind their way up to my landing. Connor is clutching his thigh and leaning on Kim, one arm around her shoulders.

'What happened?'

'Police were after us,' Kim says, panting. 'Connor's been stabbed.'

I hurry them inside the flat, whistle for Little Legs, who takes his time shuffling in after them.

'Fucking security guard had a knife,' Kim says. 'Got him in the leg but it's not bad - we just need to get the blood off him.'

'What security guard?'

'Connor knows him from before. He was after the copper piping. '

'You can make loads on copper,' Connor says, limping into the kitchen.

'Let's have a look at that wound.'

'Nah, you're alright,' Connor says, smirking.

'Let her, Con,' Kim says, 'while I get the blood off.'

She tells him to take his boot off. They are Timberland style and one of them has a dark stain on the toe.

'It's evidence,' she explains, 'if the feds come asking. Give it here.'

'Never mind evidence,' Connor says. 'These are new.'

He sits at Mum's polished table and unlaces his boot with one hand, keeping the other clamped around his thigh. I hunt for the First Aid kit under the sink while Kim scrubs at the boot with the sponge I use for cleaning dishes.

'They'll be round tomorrow and this will be proof,' she says.

She is still panting.

'I'll wear my trainers,' Connor says.

'Of course you 'ain't gonna wear the boots!'

He rolls up the leg of his tracksuit bottoms but the wound is higher up and I have to ask him to drop his trousers.

'Dirty cow,' Connor smirks.

He pulls them down, revealing Calvin Klein boxers and a skinny, hairless thigh with a deep gash in it. When I clean away the blood, a pale layer of fat is clearly visible inside the wound.

'You'll have to hide the boots,' Kim tells him. 'But they'll be checking under the bed, looking in your cupboards, trying to catch you out.'

'I'll ask Nat to look after 'em,' Connor says, flinching as I try to close the flesh together.

'Nat? Why ask that fuck-up?'

'Alright then I won't.'

'No but why ask her? That's all I'm saying.'

'I'm not going to ask her! I'll chuck them out instead.'

'You can't chuck these out! They cost seventy quid!'

'Covered in blood...'

'I know they're covered in blood! What d'you think I'm doing? I'm cleaning them aren't I!'

They're shouting now.

'Careful not to wake Jade,' I say, and the mention of their daughter's name is like a magic balm.

'How was she?' Kim's voice softens.

She leans against the sink for a moment, catching her breath.

'Are you ok?'

'Asthma,' she says, placing a hand on her chest. 'Forgot my inhaler didn't I. How was she?'

'She was perfect.'

I bandage Connor's wound but it's deep and blood seeps through the dressing straightaway. I tell him he needs to get it checked out at the hospital.

'Fuck that,' he says, and he turns to Kim. 'Are we going or what? I thought we were meant to be pulling an all-nighter.'

They take a look at Jade before they leave and Kim notices her things drying on the radiator.

'Thought I'd give them a wash,' I say and she nods.

'Won't she fall out of there?' She whispers, staring at the little girl in my bed.

'I won't let her,' I say.

We arrange to meet at the community centre the following morning.

'Take it easy,' I say. 'No more fighting.'

Connor laughs. 'We'll try.'

They disappear into the night. After they have gone, Little Legs comes out onto the stairs with me where I clean up the trail of blood with a baby wipe.

I wake to the sound of Jade shuffling around. She has worked her way to the end of the bed, somehow.

‘Good morning, little lady,’ I say. ‘Good morning, my princess!’

She is warm from sleep and her hair is a blonde halo. With her flushed cheeks she is the prettiest baby in the world. We stand at the window watching day dawn while I try out different names on her. Aurora suits her, I think, and she seems to think so too. I make her a bottle and get her dressed in the little outfit Kim has packed. She watches while I fold the rest of her clothes. The unicorn cushion has come out beautifully in the wash, its gold stitching glints in the sunlight.

Kim is at the community centre before I am. She blows her cigarette smoke over one shoulder and holds her cigarette behind her back when she crouches to greet her daughter.

'Spent all night at Nat's didn't we,' she says when I ask after Connor.

'Nat as in Nat?'

'Yeah. She don't look after that kid of hers, y'know. He was awake the whole time we was there, running around the place.'

‘I’m happy to have Aurora any time,’ I tell her. ‘Jade, I mean. I can have her any time you want.’

Kim straightens and tosses away her cigarette.

‘I’ll take her now, ta.’

I tell her about the double buggy Nikki has bought.

‘Her baby’s not due yet – We could put Jade in it, take her somewhere.’

‘Take her where?’

‘Oh, you know, the park.’

‘Yeah, maybe.’

‘I take the little boy to a singing group – Jade might like it.’

‘She does like music,’ Kim says.

‘She does, doesn’t she!’

I sing Kim the jeggings song and she laughs, tells me I’m a nutter. We arrange for me to take Jade to the next Me-Sign.

‘What about your own kids?’ she asks.

‘They don’t want to come singing with their mum any more.’

‘Growing up?’

I nod.

She doesn’t need the truth.

* * *

Fox invites me to lunch at a restaurant in town. I shave my legs and straighten my hair, put on my face. My earrings catch the light and the silk dress I bought for someone's wedding a few years ago clings to my stomach and breasts. I am pleased with my reflection in the mirror. Lily wants to know where I am going.

'Out to lunch,' I tell her and she says she knows that but where am I going.

'Funny girl,' I say. 'Which shoes?'

Lily shrugs so I limp into John's room wearing one strappy sandal and one plimsoll.

'Which shoes?' I ask, but he is playing on the X-Box and besides, his mother is wearing make-up and a sexy dress so he won't look at me. My phone is ringing and I hobble fast to the kitchen to answer it.

It is Nikki.

'I know it's short notice,' she says, 'but could you look after Marcel? Something's happened.'

'Is everything okay?'

'My work is often not okay. Have you seen the news? We're the top story this lunchtime.'

I switch on the television and flick through the channels. A 'breaking news' banner running along the bottom of the screen informs me that a woman has been rescued from a house where she claims to have been held against her will for twenty years. Rob is at a meeting in London and Nikki needs me straightaway. I phone Fox to reschedule. He

tries hard to hide his disappointment so I tell him about my strappy sandals and promise to go over to his afterwards.

‘Don’t bother,’ he says, and I think I’ve blown it until he completes his sentence with the words ‘wearing knickers.’

‘Wow! You look gorgeous!’ Nikki says when I arrive. ‘Is this how you look in normal life when you’re not rolling around getting rice cakes in your hair?’

I tell her I had a date.

‘Oh no! You’re making me feel terrible,’ she says, but she already has her coat on and is in a rush to leave.

Marcel scrabbles at his crate of toys in the living room, trying to pull it out from the bookshelf. In his corduroy dungarees and mini flannel shirt he looks like a 1950s mechanic. When he sees me, he makes urgent noises and bounces up and down to enlist my help. The television is on, tuned to a news channel.

‘Is it true?’ I ask Nikki, dragging the crate of toys into the middle of the room. ‘About the woman who was kept prisoner?’

‘I’m afraid so,’ she says. ‘And she isn’t the only one.’

She is busy texting someone but now she looks up from her phone.

‘I have to speak to the press – do I look alright?’

She holds her coat open to show me her outfit – a neat black skirt and cream blouse.

‘Very smart,’ I say.

She studies me for a moment, taking in the pattern on my silk dress.

‘Gosh, I don’t know anything about you, do I? Well, hopefully Marcel will appreciate how beautiful you look. Oh, and the dog, too – he’s downstairs, if you could take him out for a poo?’

Then she is gone. Marcel and I empty his toys onto the living room floor and then we pile up sofa cushions for jumping into. He is quite bold in his little body, even though he isn’t standing on his own yet. I hold his hands and he knows to bend his knees before taking a stunted little leap and landing among the pillows. His face is open with pleasure as he lies sprawled on the mountain we have made, laughing at the ceiling. I take a photo and send it to Fox.

two timing you with this little fella x

Marcel snatches at my phone, squawks to be thrown among the cushions once more. Pinch can hear us from his basement prison and starts howling so we go downstairs and let him out. I sit Marcel on top of him and take another photo.

never work with animals or children x

I hold Marcel around his little dungareed waist and he rides the dog around the kitchen. After lunch, when he goes down for a nap, I phone Fox, putting him on speaker while I tidy up the sofa cushions.

‘Looks like you’re having fun,’ he says.

‘Are you jealous?’

‘A bit.’

He asks where Nikki and Rob live.

‘Up near the station, isn’t it?’ he says.

I tell him the name of the road and he wants to know the house number.

‘Why do you need the number?’

‘I’m in the neighbourhood,’ he says. ‘I could pop by.’

‘I’m working...’

‘I thought you said the baby was asleep?’

As we are speaking a text comes through from Nikki:

You missed a call from me at 14.49

Then another one:

R delayed, any chance u can do bath time & poss bed time?

‘Bobbi? Are you there?’

‘I might have to stay late,’ I say. ‘The woman I childmind for just texted...’

‘Do they know about your situation, Bobbi?’

‘My situation?’

‘I know about your children,’ he says.

A chill flushes through me. The silk of my dress feels cold next to my body.

‘I know about your children,’ Fox says. ‘Sameer told me.’

I kill the phone call and run upstairs.

Marcel's room is dark. I stand in the doorway listening to his sleep-breathing. I like him to have a gentle waking rhythm. I crouch next to his cot and whisper his name but he doesn't stir. His breathing continues, shallow and delicate, wispy as his hair. I speak his name a little louder and he gives a shudder, lets out a sigh. I reach inside the cot and slide my hands underneath his warm body, scooping him into my arms so I can rock rock rock him.

Downstairs, there is a knocking and Pinch starts barking. I take Marcel with me to answer the door.

'Hello you,' Fox says and then addresses Marcel with 'Who's this handsome fellow?'

'What are you doing here?' I ask.

He doesn't answer, just ducks slightly so he can look into Marcel's sleepy face while he tells him how pleased he is to meet him at last.

'Wasn't sure you were real, to be honest,' he says, but Marcel is disoriented and unsure of this stranger and turns away, burying his face in my shoulder.

'You look nice,' Fox says to me.

He peers past me into the hallway where Pinch paces around in circles behind me, whining.

'You can't come in,' I say.

Fox whistles to Pinch and makes a fuss of him when the dog responds by shoving

past me and sniffing Fox's crotch. Fox strokes him roughly and calls him 'boy', telling him how handsome he is.

'Don't let him out,' I say.

'What time do you finish?'

'I might have to give Marcel his bath and put him to bed, his daddy's going to be late.'

'Do they know, Bobbi?'

Behind the house a train slows then stops.

'I think you should tell them,' Fox says.

The photographs hanging in the hallway tremble in their frames and the floor seems to ripple, like a wave. It buckles and heaves and then is still once more. With a hiss, the train is on its way again.

'It's none of your business,' I say, and my voice seems un-naturally loud.

'No?'

He looks at me with his extremely blue eyes.

'No.'

I grab Pinch's collar and yank him inside the house.

'See you later?'

'Maybe.'

I close the door and I can't help shivering with cold. Whose idea was it to wear a silk dress? I am shaking uncontrollably.

'It's alright, it's alright, shh shh,' I say, sinking to the floor with Marcel in my arms, rocking him and holding him tight.

We spend a quiet afternoon in the house. I'm scared to go out in case Fox is waiting for us.

'Did you get my texts?' Rob asks when he arrives home.

'My phone was switched off,' I tell him.

'Never mind. Sorry to keep you so late.'

He riffles through the stationery on the writing desk.

'How was your meeting?' I ask.

'My meeting was good, my meeting was good.'

He gives up hunting through pens and paper.

'I've got your cash but I can't seem to find an envelope for it,' he says, and pulls a wad of notes out of his jeans pocket. 'Sorry.'

'I don't need an envelope.'

Marcel wants to play with the pot of pens.

'Six hours, yes?'

'That's right.'

He separates five ten pound notes, handing them to me.

'I need to give you some change,' I say, but he tells me the extra is a bonus for coming at short notice.

'What a day!' he says, messing up his hair then smoothing it behind his ears. 'Did you watch the news?'

He picks up the TV remote and aims it at the television, flicking to a news channel where Nikki is being interviewed in front of the Scotland Yard sign.

‘Look, Marcel, it’s Mummy!’

A red panel in one corner of the screen reads ‘Live’ and a banner underneath identifies Nikki as ‘Charity spokesperson Nicky King’.

‘Spelt her name wrong,’ Rob says.

Marcel makes ‘d’ ‘d’ sounds and slithers off my lap, scampering on all fours over to the enormous television and pulling himself to standing. He thwacks the screen with a biro while his mother talks about highly traumatised women who have been rescued and taken to a place of safety.

‘They’re getting all the help and support we can offer,’ she says.

‘Dah, dah,’ says Marcel.

‘Mama not Dadda,’ Rob says. ‘Get that pen off him could you, Bobbi?’

The wind blows Nikki’s hair in front of her face and she flicks it away. Rob thinks she looks nervous but she seems very professional to me. I think about the baby growing inside her, invisible to viewers.

‘She told me about the pregnancy,’ I say. ‘Congratulations.’

Rob nods.

‘Thanks,’ he says, not taking his eyes from the screen. ‘Sooner than we thought but it’ll be nice.’

His phone rings in his pocket. He checks the display and signals to me that he needs to take the call, mouthing Nikki’s name.

‘Yes, I’m here,’ he says, leaning away from Marcel who tries to grab the phone.

‘Yup, can do... Will do, yes... you just do your thing.’

The red panel on the television screen tells me his wife is speaking live but she is

on the phone to her husband. 'Live' isn't live.

'She might have to work all night,' Rob says when he has finished the call.

'I could stay if you like?'

He looks at me, taking in my silk dress and dangly earrings.

'That might be good,' he says.

'It's another pair of hands, isn't it,' I say. 'If you need help putting Marcel to bed - and in the morning.'

'As long as your own family can cope without you?'

I tell him they can cope.

'Thanks Bobbi, you're a lifesaver,' he says.

He texts Nikki to let her know and I take Marcel upstairs to give him his bath. He is fat and shiny as a seal and bats enthusiastically at a family of yellow plastic ducks as they bob on the surface of the water. The ducks range in size from big to little. They match the ones that decorate his changing mat. Occasionally, he smacks them so vigorously that he loses his balance and slips under the water and I have to pull him to the surface again. I soap his little body then rinse him and lift him out of the bath and parcel him up in a towel. He smells of lemons. I write *Pick lemons* on the misted glass of the mirror and we watch beads of water drip from the letters. I take deep breaths of sandalwood and cinnamon and then I go downstairs.

Rob is sitting on the sofa with a glass of wine.

'I put a couple of ready-meals in the oven,' he says. 'I hope you like Coq au Vin?'

He places his wine glass carefully on the floor, holding out his arms for Marcel. I give him his child.

‘Careful he doesn’t wee on you, he hasn’t got a nappy on.’

‘Oh wee away, boy,’ says Rob. ‘I don’t mind.’

‘There’s something I should tell you,’ I say.

Rob looks at me.

‘Don’t say you’re pregnant, too?’

‘No.’

The opposite, in a way.

The figures in the paintings on the living room walls seem to shift and stretch, as if readying themselves. I can hear them breathing. I can hear them yawning and sighing. The floor trembles underneath me like the earthquake simulator John and I tried out in a museum once. I tell Rob my children died in a car crash two years ago.

‘You’re kidding me, right?’

I tell him I’m not kidding.

The words get easier but other people’s reactions are still hard.

‘Oh, Bobbi.’

He sits back, his hands loosening around his own child.

Marcel squawks and kicks his legs excitedly.

‘Oh, Bobbi,’ Rob says once more. ‘I’m so sorry.’

The strain in his face and voice are familiar. There was a time when I saw it in everyone's face and voice. *Sorry for your loss* hovers between us so I head up the stairs. In the bathroom, the words I wrote on the mirror have dribbled. ‘Pick lemons’ was Lily’s first proper sentence. She spoke it when we were on holiday in Greece and I wrote it on the back of the tourist map so we wouldn’t forget. I lift the soap to my nostrils and I can

smell the lemons we picked. I put the soap down again and fetch a clean Babygro and nappy from the linen cupboard.

‘I don’t know what to say,’ Rob says, when I come back downstairs.

I am the walking wounded. My injuries are the empty spaces around me which used to be filled with my children’s bodies. They are plain to see, if you know to look for them. Fox knows to look for them and now Rob does too.

‘It’s okay,’ I say, handing him the clean nappy and Marcel’s Babygro.

‘But it’s not, is it,’ he says.

He asks if I would like to talk about it and I tell him I wouldn’t. They were with their father, I say, in a car he was driving, but it’s as if what I have said incapacitates him. He lies spread-eagled on the sofa, his legs splayed. Marcel snatches the clean nappy and throws it on the floor.

* * *

The ticking of a clock wakes me but I have no idea if I have been asleep for minutes or hours or days. I am still wearing my silk dress. I get out of bed and look out of the window. The street is dark and empty. Everyone is tucked up asleep in their beds. Tick. Tock. Tuck. With every passing second my children have been dead for longer but it doesn’t matter how long they have been gone, the point is they are gone.

I am the walking wounded. Even a trip to the corner shop is agony – feeling my neighbours’ eyes on me, the pain of Sameer’s knowledge in every gesture of his, in every

look. These are people who knew John and Lily, who saw them on their way to and from school, who pulled disapproving faces when they overheard Lily and her friends swearing, who told John off for kicking his ball over their fence or too near their car. Now they pull a different kind of face. They smile and say hello and some stop to pass the time of day, all too aware of the empty space around us where my children used to be.

People were kind at the time, of course they were, but I couldn't take their kindness, can't take their kindness. They talked about my children being somewhere else. Above me, they said, or all around. I'm sorry, I would say, they are dead and when we are dead, we are dead, that is all. But they live on, don't they? In your memories, they would say.

We are born and then we die, that is all. The police made me sit down when they came to the flat. They ushered me into my own living room like I was the guest, not them. The driver lost control of the vehicle, they said. The car was travelling at speed, they said, when it collided with the central barrier. All four occupants were killed on impact. 'Four occupants?' I asked the woman police officer, and she looked in her little black book and read out a woman's name I didn't recognise.

A woman died and I am jealous because she wasn't me. A woman who wasn't their mother was with them when the last air they breathed left their body. Her blood, her breath mingled with theirs but it was my blood and my oxygen when they were growing inside me, my bathwater they shared when we were trying to save money.

This isn't real, I said to the police. This isn't what I'm experiencing. I asked them to take me to the scene but they refused. I want to see where it happened, I said. I was there at the beginning and I want to be there at the end. Not a good idea, the counsellor

said, Take me, I said. There's nothing to see. Of course there's something to see! Even if you're blind! Close your eyes and see what you can see, there's always something. A tree, a house, sky, like in the pictures Lily use to draw. A road. You have no imagination, I told them and I saw one of them make a note in his little black book, the same as the woman police officer's, they all have them, to write down facts, only the facts, no imagination. Move along there's nothing to see. Debris in the road and a bag of bloodied clothes they gave me when I asked.

I can't find the clock but its ticking is deafening so I get out of bed and creep along to Marcel's room. I stand outside the door listening for his breathing but the ticking is too loud. I go downstairs. My bag is hanging on the banister where I left it. I hook it over my shoulder and its weight is like a pendulum. It tips me slightly off balance but I steady myself in front of the photographs lining the hallway walls. Streetlight shafts through the glass above the front door, lighting up Marcel's black and white portrait and the picture of the beach. The beach is empty and looks peaceful. It is somewhere I could go with Marcel.

The downstairs clock has a different tock to the ticking that woke me up - its deep echo in the empty room is calm and steady compared to the frantic chirping of the one upstairs. The kitchen tiles are cold underfoot. I fumble for the light switch and when I find it their black and white diamonds swim in front of my eyes, their contrast too strident for this soft hour. Pinch is whining in the utility room so I let him out. He shows me where his biscuits are, his tail wagging. I pour them as quietly as possible into the metal bowl but they rattle and clang.

I sit at the table and take out Lily's diary, unlock its tiny padlock and start to write. I write about the clock ticking, about Pinch's biscuits. I write about the tiny padlock. The flow of the words and the flow of the ink are aided by the rhythm of the clock which sets my pace.

As ink flows, so does my blood. There is a seeping in my underwear and when I go upstairs to the bathroom I discover I have started my period. I stuff my underwear with toilet paper and take off my dress, rinsing the stained silk in the sink, turning the running water pink. I'm a poet and I know it. In Marcel's room, I stand in the doorway listening for his breath. The room is dark and still. I approach the cot, whisper his name.

'Marcel?'

But I can't hear him, can't see his shape in the dark. I switch on the light. The cot is empty. I run down the stairs, tap urgently on Rob and Nikki's bedroom door.

'Bobbi?' Rob's voice sounds sleepy.

'I can't find Marcel.'

I push the door open. There is movement in the darkness and a bedside lamp is switched on.

'He's here,' Rob whispers.

I can only just make out Marcel, asleep in a travel cot which stands next to the bed. I can see the soft round of his shoulder, his dark hair, that's all. Rob stares at me and I realise I am wearing nothing apart from the sexy underwear I put on for my date with Fox. It seems a long, long time since I was getting dressed for lunch. Now my knickers are stuffed with toilet paper and my dress is soaking in the sink.

'Try to get some sleep,' Rob says.

I go downstairs in my bra and pants and shut Pinch in the utility room. Then I go back to my room where I lie down once more. The clock's incessant ticking fills my head. If I could see its face it might seem a friendly kind of clock but I can only hear its torturous tick, each sound bisecting the dark into before and after.

It wasn't his turn to have them that weekend but he wanted to take them to a luxury spa. He was flash with his money and he knew I had none, which was why we went on holiday together. John and Lily were confused. 'How come Dad doesn't live with us anymore?' they asked. 'Tell them,' I said to Danny, but that just made them think there was something to tell when there was nothing to tell. Not when we split up, that is. The name of that fourth occupant - the stranger's name I didn't recognise, the woman who isn't me and who was with my children when they died - suggests there was something to tell at a later date, something John and Lily knew, and kept from me. He had been seeing her for a while, apparently, and she was sometimes at his on the weekends when they stayed with him but neither of them mentioned her and nor did Dan. 'Lily felt sorry for you,' her friend Saskia told me. 'She thought you were lonely.'

The night before the accident John asked me to make sponge pudding. Now I think about it, I wonder if he was trying to make me feel better. He knew I was angry with their dad, knew I would be left behind when they went on their trip to the spa hotel. Knew too that a fourth occupant would be going with them.

'If you've got money for custard I'll make pudding,' I said and I span off into a rant about not having any money, about having to empty the coppers jar to buy bread and

toilet roll.

The driver lost control of the vehicle and the car smashed into the central reservation, killing all four occupants.

Their deaths expose me. I am raw. My body – this body which housed them and fed them is an open wound. I am like a burn victim whose skin is re-scorched with every touch and when I tell others I incinerate them, too. I hurt everyone and I hurt everywhere. The writing stops the hurt because inside the writing I am with my children.

I write it all down. I write about sponge pudding and custard and my children live again. There is a hole where they were and words rush to fill it.

* * *

A scratching at the door. It is the dog and it is day. At first I don't know where I am and then I hear a train's brakes wheezing as the train creeps into the station from its sidings. I am touched by the modesty of the waiting vehicle, its modesty and its capability. Empty carriages, freshly cleaned, seats upholstered in yellow and black livery, waiting to hold people and transport them, take them somewhere they want to go.

Then the sound of Marcel crying and Rob's murmur as he moves around with him in his room below. The clock is still ticking but in daylight I find it, tucked behind some books on a shelf. Downstairs, I slip it inside my bag. I will steal time and I will cheat it. I will rewind the hours until the moment when I am saying 'goodbye, have fun' to John and Lily and I won't let them go.

Rob is in the kitchen, sitting at the table in his dressing gown, typing fast on his laptop.

'I'll get dressed,' he says, getting up and snapping his laptop shut. 'You too, Monsieur, come on.'

He tucks his laptop under one arm and heaves Marcel out of his highchair. His moccasin slippers shuffle-slap on the tiles as he leaves, taking Marcel and his laptop with him. I put away the breakfast things away and wipe down surfaces and then I follow them upstairs. I can hear Marcel playing in his parents' bedroom and I can hear the tapping of Rob's fingers on a keyboard. I knock on the door.

'Yes?'

Rob is still in his dressing gown, lying on top of his bed against the embroidered pillows, typing on his laptop. Marcel is sitting in the travel cot playing with his mother's

necklaces. When he sees me, he pulls himself to standing, holding onto the mesh walls of his cage.

‘I could take Marcel to the park if you’re working?’

‘Oh, no Bobbi it’s alright, thank you,’ Rob says, laying his laptop aside and getting up from the bed.

‘I’d like to,’ I say.

‘It’s just that Nikki will be back soon,’ Rob says.

He scruffs up his hair. I’m not sure he’s telling the truth.

‘I thought she was in London?’

‘She’s on her way – she just texted.’

Marcel makes a noise, whooping as he tosses one of the Indian necklaces out of the travel cot.

‘Do you think you’re okay to be on your own? Is there’s someone who’ll look after you?’ Rob asks.

‘I’m not on my own,’ I say. ‘I’m here with you.’

‘Good, Bobbi. That’s good.’

He gathers up his laptop and straightens the bedclothes.

‘You’re welcome to stay and talk,’ he says.

‘Oh no,’ I say. ‘I can see you’re busy.’

I go back downstairs, put on my strappy sandals and let myself out of the house.

On my way home, I buy fags from Sameer.

‘Not a good habit,’ he tells me. ‘Custard is better.’

I want to tell him that gossiping about people isn’t a good habit either but I don’t say anything, just hand him my money and leave. Fox’s van is parked at the end of the street. I hold out my door key and drag it along the side panel of the van as I walk past, scoring an uneven silver line in the metal. It is such a pleasurable sensation I turn around and retrace my steps, swapping my key into my nearside hand and scraping another jagged line along the bodywork.

At home, I sit in my bedroom window blowing smoke signals, waiting for Fox to see the message I have left for him. I sit there for most of the day before I spot him turning the corner at the end of the road. He is wearing a jacket and tie. He glances at the van as he approaches Sameer’s shop and I see him pause and study the scratch, see his face twist into a frown. He glances around as if the culprit might be nearby and I duck out of sight. Little Legs pads over to see what I am doing, crouching on the floor under the window.

‘Sssh,’ I tell him.

He looks at me with sad eyes and settles down next to me, resting his chin on his paws. The shop bell rings. Fox will be telling Sameer about the vandals who have scratched his van. Sameer will tell him that only last year hooligans set light to the clubhouse on the bowling green.

I get up from the bedroom floor and go into the bathroom to wash my hands and face, brush my teeth. I count to a hundred before letting myself out of the flat.

Before I knock I try some of the breathing exercises recommended by bereavement websites. When Fox opens the door he is still wearing his jacket and tie.

‘I’m glad you came,’ he says.

I can’t help panting - the exercises don’t help. He takes my hands and pulls me gently over the threshold. My breath comes in short, jagged gasps as I pull off his jacket. We fall awkwardly to the floor and I thrash my legs and arms against his body, against the walls and stairs and banisters of his new house.

Afterwards, he tells me he understands.

‘Understand what?’

‘Why you didn’t say.’

Do you understand that I hallucinate my children, I want to ask? Understand that I conjure them next to me on the sofa with their phones? Understand that Lily’s blouse, John’s duvet are relics I hold to my face so I can breathe their smell? Understand that when I trace the outline of my tattoo with my fingertips I am remembering her doing the same?

She will never have a tattoo of her own and nor will John. No-one will ever ink their skin because their skin has become ash that floats in the air.

Fox’s fingers are soft but his movements are too gentle. What I need is something hard and sharp to pierce me, to score across me and cut me open. I put my clothes back on.

‘Want me to come with you?’ he asks, and when I say no he wishes me a safe journey across the road.

He watches me tap in the door code to my building but I don’t turn and wave. I let myself into the flat, whistling quietly, waiting for John or Lily to answer with their own whistle but their rooms are empty and there is silence apart from the clicking of Little

Legs' claws as he comes to greet me.

* * *

I watch the 24 hour news channel for twenty-four hours. Nikki's interview in front of the Scotland Yard sign plays over and over but there is no longer a sign that reads 'live'.

'Hey!' I yell to the kids. 'The woman I work for is on TV!'

Nikki talks about a letter one of the women was able to smuggle out.

'What did the letter say?' her interviewer asks.

'She accuses her captors of making her a non-person,' Nikki says. 'She was locked in a room and not allowed out. She refers to herself as an outline of a person.'

'Jon! Lils! The woman I work for is on the telly!'

The springs of John's mattress squeak and his bedroom door opens. He pads into the room and cosies up next to me, wrapped in his duvet.

'Hello my beauty!'

Then Lily emerges, too.

'Why are you being all mental?' she says, dropping onto the sofa.

'I'm happy to see you, that's all.'

John lifts my hand, placing my arm around his shoulders. Little Legs jumps off my lap and all three of us chorus 'No, Little Legs, come back!' and pat our laps to show him he is welcome. He stands in front of us, staring, and in the end Lily has to snatch him up and wedge him in between us. Meanwhile, on the television, Nikki's hair blows in front of her face and she is wearing the same clothes she wore yesterday and she is saying the same things she said yesterday, about non-people and outlines of people.

'That's the woman I work for,' I tell my children.

Nikki is talking about modern-day slaves.

'I thought slavery was abolished,' says John. 'William Wilberforce.'

'Neek' says his sister, and she tells him his duvet stinks.

'How can you stand it like that?' I ask him.

'I like the smell,' he says.

'Not the smell, I'm not talking about the smell,' I say. 'I'm talking about the bunching up.'

The duvet is lumpy and folded in on itself inside its cover. Parts of it are plump and full and other bits are like an empty sack. Like a non-duvet. Like the outline of a duvet. Sometimes, I find my own duvet like it and I have to take the cover off and re-stuff it.

I watch the news for hours and when I eventually switch off the television I can't sleep. The ticking of the clock I took from Nikki and Rob's is too loud. I tiptoe into Lily's room and hide it in her bed.

'What are you doing?' she whispers as I lift up the corner of her duvet.

'Sshh. Clock's too loud,' I say, and I give the sole of her foot a little stroke. She pulls her foot away, annoyed, drawing her knees up into foetal position.

I return to my own room but I can still hear the clock ticking.

* * *

Minutes turn into hours turn into days and then it is time for me to look after Marcel again. When Nikki answers the door it is a shock to see her in the flesh because I have become so used to seeing her on television. Instead of her neat skirt suit she is wearing loose trousers in a floppy material and a soft crew-necked jumper.

‘Come in!’ She says. ‘Come in!’

She seems surprised to see me. I wipe my feet on the ‘Enter’ doormat.

‘Weren’t you expecting me?’ I ask.

‘We didn’t know...’ Nikki says.

She grimaces briefly and whispers something I can’t hear.

‘We’re having coffee,’ she says, recovering herself. ‘Come downstairs.’

In the kitchen, Marcel is sitting on Rob’s lap.

‘Look who’s here!’ Nikki says.

She hands me a mug of coffee and we sip our drinks, oddly polite, as if we don’t know one another.

‘Rob told me... about your children,’ Nikki says at last, and she flicks her hair.

‘I tried to text you,’ she says. ‘But I just didn’t know what to say.’

I tell them about my children. I tell them about visiting the crash site. I tell them about Lily’s friends decorating her coffin and I tell them how much John’s teacher cried at his funeral. At some point Rob must have left for work because when I finish talking he is no longer in the room. The old-fashioned clock on the wall ticks its steady tick and for once Pinch lies still, twitching in his sleep.

‘Is it Me-sign today?’ I ask, and Nikki tells me there’s no need for me to go.

‘Oh, I want to,’ I say.

‘Are you sure?’ she asks, and when I say yes she tells me she will come too.

‘You shouldn’t be alone,’ she says.

‘I won’t be alone, I’ll be with Marcel.’

She goes to the sink and splashes her face with water then dabs it dry with a tea towel. She is owed time off from work so she will spend the morning with Marcel and me. Her face makes its strange contortion again.

‘I’m so sorry, Bobbi.’

‘What for?’

‘I just feel so guilty, when you – when your...’

A sob makes her catch her breath and she apologises, lifts Marcel quickly out of his highchair and hurries out of the room. I sit at the kitchen table listening to the tick of the clock and the train announcements.

When Nikki returns she is calm and her face is made up with kohl eye-liner, mascara and a dusting of fine powder.

‘Sorry,’ she says. ‘My hormones are all over the place.’

We go upstairs to get Marcel dressed but it is Nikki who holds him and chooses his clothes. I have to look on like someone watching a play.

‘There’s another baby I look after...’ I say. ‘A little girl. We could take her with us, test-drive the new buggy?’

Nikki likes the idea so I phone Kim and we put Marcel in the double buggy and we wheel him down the hill to collect Jade. Nikki is pleased with the way the new buggy

glides and the way its wheels turn. I walk alongside not knowing what to do with my hands.

We meet Kim outside the community centre.

‘So it’s some kind of music class you’re taking her to, yeah?’ she asks, handing me Jade who is bundled up in a little pink puffer jacket.

While Nikki explains to Kim what happens in the Me-Sign session, I introduce Jade and Marcel. Jade stares at Marcel who bounces impatiently up and down in his smart buggy.

‘Look, Marcel, Jade’s going to sit next to you,’ I say and I sing ‘Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer do’ while I strap her in.

‘It won’t be a stylish marriage! I can’t afford a carriage!’

‘Cracks me up, she does’, says Kim.

Nikki suggests Kim comes with us.

‘Nah, you’re alright,’ Kim says. ‘Jade will have a good time though.’

We say goodbye and Nikki wheels the new buggy across town to the church hall where the signing instructor is pleased to see her and kisses her when she learns she is pregnant. I ask her what she thinks of Daisy for a name if it’s a girl but she gives me an odd look and tells Nikki once more how nice it is to see her. Then she claps her hands to begin the session.

Nikki and I sit next to each other in the circle with Marcel on her lap and Jade on mine. As usual we start with ‘Who’s Me-signing?’ and the singing of each child’s name. The instructor makes a fist with her free hand and opens it again, making a ‘spark’ gesture with her fingers for Jade’s name.

'Have we got Marc-el?' she sings, and we all make the letter 'M' and sing Marcel's name while he stares around the circle of women and babies. During the break Nikki spends the time talking with the instructor. I see the instructor introduce her to Jasmine's mother, Ama. I wag Jade's little hand at Marcel but he looks straight through me, as if he doesn't recognise me.

When we gather for the second half of the session, Nikki sits next to Ama on the other side of the circle from Jade and me. The instructor pulls the bird puppet onto her arm and whirls around with a 'Birdy says wel-come!' loud enough to make Jade jump. Jade is mesmerised by Birdy's bobbing eyes. reaching out for Birdy when the instructor brings it near her. The woman darts the puppet away and makes a beak with her free hand.

'Bird-y' she says to Jade. 'Bird-y.'

She hovers the bird puppet in front of Jade, dancing it in the air and opening and shutting her finger-beak with her free hand.

In my lap, Jade raises her hand and pinches her tiny fingers together in a beak shape. There is an audible gasp from the mothers gathered in the circle. The instructor glances quickly around to make sure everyone has seen what is happening.

'Bird-y, Jade! What is it?'

Jade opens and closes her little finger-beak and a kind of creepy magic steals over the room, as if we have received a communication from The Other Side.

The instructor is triumphant.

'Wasn't that wonderful?' she whispers, her eyes as wide as the puppet's.

At the end of the session Nikki tells Jade what a clever girl she is and several of the other mothers come over to re-live the moment when she spoke to us in sign language. Nikki and I pack our children into the new buggy and make our way home, stopping off at the playground with Ama and Jasmine. We sit on the edge of the sandpit and Nikki buries her feet, wriggling her toes for Marcel to pinch. She has bubble mixture, too. She blows bubbles which shimmer and pop in the air. Marcel rocks up and down on his bottom, reaching up to try and touch them.

I take Jade over to the grass under a tree where a girl of about six years old is practising cartwheels. The ends of her hair meet the blades of grass as she turns herself upside down. I whisper to Jade that one day she will be able to turn cartwheels like that big girl. We will visit parks and beaches, I tell her, and we could even go on holiday. We'll get fish and chips and eat them with tiny cardboard forks, I tell her. When you're a big girl you'll be able to do cartwheels and when you're a young woman we could get matching tattoos. You will ask me what your mum was like and I will say I'm your mum, sweetheart, and you will say you know what I mean, my real mum. Am I not real, then? I will ask and I will let you pinch me to test if I am real and to see if I can feel pain. I can feel pain. That means I am real.

* * *

The next time I arrive for my Marcel shift, instead of going downstairs to the kitchen, Nikki invites me into the living room.

‘Is Marcel asleep?’ I ask.

There is no sign of him and his buggy has gone from the hallway.

‘No, Rob’s taken him.’

She looks a bit awkward, shifts uneasily from one foot to the other. Here it comes. I knew this was coming.

‘You look well, I tell her. ‘You’re blooming!’

‘Fat, you mean!’ She says, drawing her elegant cardigan across her breasts. ‘The thing is, Bobbi...’ She hugs herself, wraps her cardigan even tighter. ‘The thing is, what with me on maternity and Rob just around the corner, we’re both here for Marcel a bit more now and we’re not sure we need anyone else – at least not until the baby’s here.’

There is a wages envelope propped up on the old-fashioned writing desk. Nikki sees me spot it and hands it to me.

‘There’s two months wages in there.’

‘Two months?’

‘Oh, this is hard!’ You’ve been wonderful with him, Bobbi, we’re so grateful but... we need to be sure you’re well enough.’

‘Well enough?’

‘Are you sure this kind of work, looking after children, is... helpful... to you, I mean? We’re thinking about you, Bobbi. I hope you understand. We’re so grateful to

you, we really are.'

I catch the bus home. It is empty, apart from me and an elderly lady sitting on one of the priority seats at the front.

The bell on Sameer's shop door is deafening.

'Can't you make it quieter?' I ask him, bad tempered.

He looks up from the newspaper article he is reading but he doesn't say anything.

I snatch up a roll of bin-bags from a low shelf and slap them onto the counter.

* * *

It takes me a day and a night to clear John's room. Little Legs helps me, following me around like a fat brown shadow. I work efficiently, without stopping, without sleeping. The sounds I make as I fill each bin-bag are sounds I made when I first learned of the crash, sounds similar to the noise I made during childbirth – a groaning that embarrassed me with its animal-ness. I am not embarrassed now. Now I let out my animal noise. The world is asleep, anyway, no-one can hear me. When morning comes and Sameer's shutter rattles up, the sounds of birds and traffic take over.

Twelve years have been compressed into twenty-four hours and all that is left are marks on the walls where posters have been and where my boy practised keepy-uppies with balled up socks. I leave his space encyclopaedia and his Most Improved Player trophy on the empty shelves. People warned me not to let their bedrooms become a shrine. Let them warn.

I dismantle the bed his father and I assembled, piling up the pieces of its frame like firewood. His mattress was expensive, made from memory foam. I lay on it and idly scroll the internet on his i-pad, my fingers scrolling where his once did – my fingerprints gradually rubbing out his. John and Lily were always on Facebook and Instagram, always snapchatting their friends. Their digital presence outlives them. I can sign into their accounts and see what they would be looking at. On Lily's timeline a post appears about a child who inherited another child's heart in a transplant operation. The dead child's mother was able to listen to her own baby's heartbeat and there was a video of her weeping. I like the post so the person who shared it will receive notification that Lily

liked it and so she lives on, like the dead child's heart beating in another child's chest.

When I am done, I go across the road to ask Fox if he would like to come up to my flat.

'Only if you want me to,' he says.

'I want you to.'

We cross back over the road together and Fox watches as I key in the door code. We walk up the stairs, one behind the other, and I let him in. Little Legs inspects the visitor and follows us into John's room.

'Footballer, was he?' Fox asks, standing in the doorway.

'Yes.'

Light from the bare bulb bounces off the Most Improved Player.

'Who did he support?'

'Norwich.'

'Canary boy.'

'His dad's team - and his grandad's.'

Fox's eyes are very blue - more blue than normal. They are like a swimming pool.

He has seen the biro marks on the doorframe:

John 08.07.12

John 20.04.11

John 29.07.10

John 01.01.10

John 04.09.09

John 24.12.08

‘And your girl?’ he asks, eyes brimming.

‘Not a footballer,’ I say.

Together, we lift the mattress down the stairs. It is light and easily handled. We prop it against the wall outside my building with a note on it. It will be gone by morning. As we are carrying the bin-bags down the stairs the woman across the landing opens her door. Seeing me, seeing the bags, she shuts it again.

Fox collects his van and parks it outside my building.

‘Seen this?’ he asks, showing me the scratches along the whole of one side panel.

‘Terrible,’ I say, but like the bowling green clubhouse I can’t feel the terribleness, I can only say it. Scratch things, burn things, they’re only things. I think these thoughts but I don’t say them out loud.

‘It’s only a scratch,’ he says, and we load the bin-bags.

He tells me he will take John’s things to a charity shop in a different town so I am less likely to spot a boy wearing his clothes. He shuts the driver door and starts up the engine.

I remove the bundle of Takeaway leaflets he has used to wedge the door open and I go back upstairs where Lily is waiting for me. I knew she would be.

‘Why didn’t you let him take this lot?’ she says, leaning against the wall outside her bedroom, picking at the paintwork. She gives the doll’s house a kick.

‘Lily,’ I say. ‘Not now.’

* * *

The afternoons are the worst. I can't be sure if the sounds I hear from the school playground at lunchtime are real or in my head. When children pass underneath my window on their way home from school, I wait for mine. Sometimes I smoke a cigarette but mostly I try to sleep. When I wake up I find myself thinking about what to feed John for his dinner. Then I remember the dead don't need feeding.

I am hungry all the time. Fox finds it comical that I am so ravenous. He cooks up nutritious curries and stews and broths and I hang around the bubbling saucepans waiting to be fed. It's healthy I have these cravings, he tells me – it proves I am alive. He interprets this appetite of mine as my claim on the world but really it's because I feel empty. The food I want is food I made for my children – I make myself sponge pudding and custard and jam sandwiches on white bread which I cut into triangles. I buy packets of salt and vinegar crisps, the flavour John preferred. I chew gum like Lily used to. My fridge is stocked with yoghurts and cream cheese, my cupboards are full of custard. I have cravings like someone who is pregnant but I'm not pregnant, I am the opposite, bleeding heavily and losing weight. Everything passes straight through me. On some days I am eating and shitting and bleeding so much that I can't go anywhere, I have to stay where I am.

‘There's nothing of you,’ Fox says. ‘You'll disappear if you're not careful.’

I like the thought of disappearing. At night, I lie with my arms by my sides, pretending to be dead, then I get up and go into the bathroom where I stand naked on Mum's scales. As the needle quivers I think of her and how much she weighs now. She

weighs heavily on my mind and yet in terms of matter, she barely matters. What remains?
Only her remains. An armchair in someone else's house.

Autumn turns into winter and Fox tells me I need pampering.

‘A massage or a makeover,’ he says. ‘Or a haircut?’

‘What’s wrong with my hair?’ I ask and he laughs and tells me nothing’s wrong with it.

He wants to take me to London to see the Christmas lights. There is still a month to go but the city is festive and he wants to buy me presents. I make him walk past Marcel’s house on our way to the station, where a woman in a headscarf is manoeuvring a double buggy down the front steps.

‘Ama?’

She turns to face me.

‘Bobbi!’

Fox helps her with the buggy. Jasmine and Marcel are inside.

‘Hello Marcel!’

I crouch next to the buggy but he shrinks away from me, hiding his face.

‘You’re looking after him today?’ I ask Ama.

She nods and a sound of rushing fills my ears. Jasmine kicks her feet, reaching out to me. I take her hand in mine.

‘I have him on the days his father is writing,’ Ama says.

She is taking Jasmine and Marcel to the park. They won’t stay long, she says, it’s too cold.

‘Your English is very good now,’ I tell her and she smiles and thanks me, tells me

she has been having lessons.

‘Is that a train?’ I ask Fox.

The rushing sound in my ears is very loud. Ama’s hands flutter to her headscarf and when she unpins it a flock of birds fly out. They gather in a cloud and dart and swoop around us, their wings shushing, their clawed feet tangling my hair and catching my clothes as they rise into the air. I am almost lifted into the air with them.

‘Help,’ I say, but the others can’t hear me. Ama is already moving along the pavement, wheeling the double buggy and Fox’s mouth is moving. He is speaking but I can’t hear him. The birds have gone but I am drifting upwards, a light fizzy feeling in my chest. Fox takes my hand and then we too are walking. I can feel the pavement under my feet and we are heading towards the station where he asks me what snacks I want for the train.

In Oxford Street we walk up and down watching other people shopping. There is a fever in them which can only be soothed by buying buying buying. Mine is a fever that cannot be calmed - I only want what I cannot have.

We pass a place that sells expensive watches and bracelets. It is decorated with cascades of white crystal lights – great sculptural columns that divide the shop’s interior like stalactites and stalagmites. I unhook my arm from Fox’s and stand in the glow of the shop’s entrance.

‘Do you want to go in?’ Fox asks.

If I speak it will break the chemistry of the moment. The shop’s shine has transported me to a place I both know and don’t know. It is a place from my past, a moment, but I’m not sure which one. I think it has something to do with a set of plastic

jewellery we gave Lily for her birthday or Christmas one year. The memory is so precious, so delicious that I can almost taste it.

'Do you want to go in?' Fox asks once more.

It is the light I can taste. Is that possible? He is manoeuvring me inside the shop but I am afraid his words and our movement will splinter the fragile glass of memory. I walk away from the shop and then quickly retrace my steps. Fox is wrong-footed, he doesn't understand.

'Bobbi,' he says. 'What's the matter?'

I am trying to recreate the moment in which I saw the glitter of a plastic jewellery set through my daughter's eyes, which in turn is a memory inside the moment my girl's delight and my own girlish delight was captured, Russian doll-like inside these sparkling shop lights. Fox follows me while I chase something shiny and rainbowish through the tunnels of my mind, trying to catch it. My footsteps on the December late nite shopping pavement move backwards and forwards in the jeweller's shop entrance as I try to capture the anticipation of Lily's pleasure in the phoney diamante necklace, then her actual delight in it when she unwrapped her present and I put it around her tender neck.

'Catch her,' I whisper, snatching at the memory. It is impossible, though. I smack my lips, trying to get the taste back but it is gone.

I can't sleep. I hear my children calling. I unpeel myself from Fox and get out of his bed, pull aside the curtain and peer across the road. My bedroom window opposite is dark but I can hear Lily calling for me. I scan the pavements below - maybe she's locked out. Maybe she is sheltering in the porch to our building and shouting up at my bedroom

window. I put on my clothes and let myself out of Fox's house, crossing back over the road.

There is no-one home. I get into my own bed and lie staring at the ceiling until I hear the front door click and Lily creeping in, removing her Doctor Martens.

'I heard you calling,' I say, and my voice makes her jump.

'I didn't call,' she says.

She drifts into her bedroom and shuts the door.

I can't find John. He isn't on the sofa and he isn't in his bed.

* * *

Andy organises a Christmas party for the young people. Keji wears a puffed sleeve satin dress and an elaborately pleated headscarf in the same material. The others wear their uniform of tracksuit bottoms and trainers.

‘Is there anything to drink?’ Kim asks.

‘There’s no alcohol but we’ve got a very special guest,’ Andy says.

There is no sign of Connor and when I ask Kim where he is she shrugs and tells me she’s not his keeper is she. Something in her manner stops me asking her if I can hold Jade. She seems prickly, defensive. I overhear her telling the others how she and Connor broke into a car.

‘There were loads of presents in the back and one of them looked like it could be a Playstation,’ she says. ‘Turns out it wasn’t a Playstation, it was kitchen shit. What fucker gives someone a saucepan for Christmas?’

Keji thinks a saucepan is a good present. Kim tells her Connor’s giving it to his mum.

Andy announces the arrival of the mystery guest and asks everyone to bring their chairs into a circle. He leaves the room and returns with a lanky Father Christmas.

‘Look who it is, everyone!’

‘Ho ho ho,’ says Father Christmas.

He carries a bin bag of presents and has a love bite on his neck.

‘Do we have to sit on your lap?’ Nat asks.

‘Yeah, come and sit on my lap and I’ll give you one,’ says Santa.

He slaps his knees, but no-one takes up his offer. Nat tries to persuade JD to go up but he has both hands deep in a bowl of cheesy puffs and is working his way through the feast Andy and I laid out on one of the tables.

‘Come on, JD! Santa might give you a present if you’ve been a good boy,’ Nat tells him but her child refuses to go near Father Christmas, running behind the chairs with fistfuls of crisps.

‘Maybe if you take off the beard,’ Andy suggests and Father Christmas drops the tatty cotton wool beard onto the floor.

‘Look, it’s only Connor,’ Nat says to JD, and she takes him by the hand and leads him to stand in front of Connor who digs inside his bin-bag for a present. JD tears off the wrapping paper and kisses the toy car inside the parcel. He goes around the circle showing it to everyone then drives it along every available surface, brum-brumming it along windowsills and the edges of chairs and tables.

‘It’s what Christmas is all about isn’t it?’ Andy whispers to me.

Who’s next? Connor says and without needing any further invitation, Nat sits on his lap.

‘Have you been a good girl?’ Connor asks.

‘I’ve been a very bad girl,’ Nat says.

‘How about a kiss for Father Christmas?’

‘You do, Connor, and I’ll fucking kill you,’ Kim says.

But it is too late, Nat has her eyes closed and she and Connor are kissing. Kim is out of her seat and the chair she was sitting on skids from underneath her. She thrusts Jade into my arms and before I can stop her she has pulled Nat off Santa’s lap and onto the floor where she sits on top of her punching her head and snatching at her hair.

‘Bitch!’

Nat screams and Andy rushes to protect her while Connor sits smirking in his Father Christmas outfit. Kim is standing now, screaming abuse and kicking Nat while Andy tries to contain her, his arms around her. JD stops brum brum brumming his new car to stare at his mother curled up on the floor. I grab his hand and take him outside.

‘Mummy and Kim had an argument,’ I tell him. ‘They’re just sorting things out.’

He shivers as we shelter in the doorway looking for Santa’s reindeer, a sleety rain blowing in our faces, and then Andy comes to tell us the party is over.

I get home and write about the young people and their Christmas party. Writing is a way of keeping things and a way of leaving something behind. I can’t do anything without writing. It all gets written down. At night, when I catch my reflection in the dark kitchen window, there is something of Lily in the slope of my neck, in the hunch of my shoulders. If I squint at the figure I can pretend it is her, sitting at the table doing her homework.

Fox proposes day trips and evening entertainments but all I want to do is write. I stay at his for Christmas and he asks me to move in with him. He tells me he wants to

look after me.

‘Who says I need looking after?’ I say.

‘Everyone needs looking after.’

All I want to do is write.

‘When can I read your writing?’ he asks, and I tell him there is more to be written.

I write everywhere. I write in Lily's old diary, I write in the air, like people do when they signal to a waiter for the bill in a busy restaurant. I even write during sex – Fox's penis is as shapely as a quill and when he is inside me I move my hips to make words against the bed sheets.

‘Don't go,’ he says, when I am ready to cross the road back to mine. ‘I like having you here.’

‘Little Legs needs me,’ I tell him.

What I don't tell him is that the children have been gone a long time and I am waiting for them to come back. If I am elsewhere they won't know where to find me.

* * *

Neither Kim nor Connor are at the first Life Skills session after the Christmas break. When I am helping Andy stack the chairs I ask if he has heard from them.

'I doubt we'll see much more of Kim or Connor,' he says. 'It's a shame.'

He rests one hand on the chair at the top of our pile and says he will tell me something in confidence.

'Kim and Jade have been moved to a safe house.'

'A safe house?'

'There was an incident... It's not the first time.'

'Where are they?'' I ask. 'I'd like to help if I can.'

'That's kind, Bobbi, but I'm afraid I can't tell you where they're staying. Jade was injured so it's a safeguarding issue.'

The room shimmers, the pile of chairs seems precarious, as if it might topple. Andy places his hand on mine.

'I'm Sorry, Bobbi, I know you're fond of them.'

'Is Jade alright?'

'She is now.'

I try phoning Kim but her number is no longer recognised. Then one day I am at the park with Little Legs and I receive a text from a number I don't know.

can u call me pls urgent

I sit on a bench under dripping trees to ring the number.

'Bobbi, thank fuck.'

'Kim? Where are you?'

'Not allowed to say. Bournemouth.'

'How's Jade?'

'Not good, not good. She's got a fucking great bruise on her face.'

'What happened?'

'Connor's what happened.'

A breeze shivers through the trees. The park is empty. In a few hours its paths will be criss-crossed with parents collecting their children from school and later still with people making their way home from work. Kim tells me she and Connor had a fight and she was holding Jade when Connor tried to hit her. I feel faint, lean over to put my head between my knees. I concentrate on the feeling of the bench's moisture seeping through my clothes. Little Legs hobbles over to sniff my hair.

'Bobbi? Are you still there?'

'I'm still here, yes.'

'They're not letting me see him.'

'If he's violent, Kim, it's best to stay out of his way.'

'That's what everyone says but it's not as easy as that, is it.'

'But if he's been violent and Jade's been hurt -'

'I ain't allowed to speak to anyone. It's like prison. I had to give them my other phone in case he tries to contact me.'

'How's Jade?'

'Apart from her fucking face, you mean?'

I hear a seagull's cry at the other end of the line.

'If I see him or speak to him they'll take her off me, Bobbi.'

'They're trying to help.'

'Bunch of cunts.'

She tells me that unless she can separate from Connor, Jade will be emergency fostered.

'Oh, Kim, you don't want that, do you.'

'Course I don't but it's not like he's a paedo.'

'But if he's got a history of violence...'

'Bobbi, you're starting to sound like one of them.'

The phone line crackles as she moves around at the other end.

'Listen, I gotta go now but meet me, yeah? Social's bringing me in for an appointment next week.'

'I don't want to get you into trouble,' I say.

'Fuck that,' she says.

* * *

The clocks spring forward so I have one less hour to wait until I see Jade. I sit in bed with Nikki and Rob's clock in my hands, watching hours and minutes tick past.

Finally, it is time. I have arranged to meet Kim in a café. It is empty when I get there, apart from an old man who sits with the waitress at a table in one corner. They look up when I slam the café door and the waitress gets up and goes into a kitchen at the back. The old man spreads out his newspaper, smoothing its pages. The waitress brings him a cup of tea and comes over to me, pen poised over a tiny notebook.

'What can I get you?'

Star shaped notices in fluorescent coloured card stuck on the windows announce egg & chips and meal deals for pensioners.

'I'm waiting for someone,' I say.

The waitress nods and retreats once more to the kitchen then the door bangs and Kim backs into the cafe with Jade in a buggy.

'She's in a buggy now!' I say, as we wrestle the pushchair through the door.

Jade's little body shunts from side to side.

'Place I'm in isn't big enough for a pram,' Kim says.

She looks tired. Her hair is greasy and hangs lank around her pale face.

'I see you've still got your pretty unicorn cushion though, Jade!'

'Get her out if you like.'

I lift Jade out of her buggy and sit her on my lap. She wears her pink headband with the pink flower on it.

'Her hair's grown,' I say.

'I can't do nothing with it. It's got a mind of its own.'

Kim reaches across the table to pull aside the stretchy pink headband.

'Her bruise is going down – you can hardly see it now.'

A brownish yellow mark stains the pale skin at Jade's temple. Kim covers it with the headband once more and the waitress comes over.

'Bacon butty,' Kim says, without looking at her.

'And I'll have a round of toast, please.'

The waitress nods, writes.

'Any drinks?'

I order tea and Kim asks for a coke. The waitress writes down our order and adds a decisive full stop before pocketing her pad and pen.

'So how have you been?' I ask, once the waitress has left.

'As well as can be expected.'

'And Connor? Have you had any contact?'

'Not since the night he smacked her,' Kim says.

'I 'ain't seen anyone since that night,' Kim says. 'It's just been me and her. She's my rock.'

She reaches across to take her daughter's hand.

'They're going to take her away,' she says, adjusting Jade's headband once more.

'Hopefully it won't come to that.'

'You don't know what they're like, Bobbi. They'll take her off me.'

I have the sensation of Jade lifting out of my arms, as if she might float up into

the air and out of the café window.

'Love her to bits but I might not be the best parent for her.'

'That doesn't sound like you speaking.'

'What are you talking about? Who else is it?'

The waitress arrives with our order. She sets the can of coke down noisily on the table in front of Kim, places a mug of tea in front of me.

'They're saying I got to stop seeing Connor. Social are telling me there's got to be no contact but he's her dad!'

She is about to say something else but stops herself.

'Smashed that doll, didn't I,' she says.

'What doll?'

'The one I made of Connor at Life Skills. Kept the one I made of her though.'

She peels a crust off my toast and puts it in Jade's hand, closing her little fingers around it. Jade wags it uselessly in front of her face and Kim laughs.

'Loves her food,' she says. 'Bread's her favourite.'

'Are you weaning her, then?'

'Weaning, yes.'

She takes a sip of Coke.

'Social worker said you would be a good person to come to the hearing. I need someone with me.'

'I'll come. I'm here for you.'

'Do you reckon he'll be there?'

'Who?'

'Connor. I don't reckon he will. He don't care about us, he only cares about himself.'

'That's probably true.'

'Do you think he'll turn up? He most probably won't turn up, will he?'

I try to understand what the hearing will determine but Kim is focussed on the issue of whether Connor will be there and repeats her mantra about not being the best parent for her daughter. Then she says it is time for her to leave.

'Man about a dog,' she says.

She tips back her head to drain her can then holds out her arms for Jade. I pay for our drinks and we shunt our way awkwardly out of the café while the waitress stands behind her counter watching us.

'Nice of someone to help,' Kim says loudly, as she struggles with the door, and once we are outside on the pavement she tells me 'that was my auntie.'

'Who? The waitress?'

'My mum's sister, yeah. They don't speak. I don't have nothing to do with Mum's side of the family.'

She is amused by how surprised I am.

'See the old geezer reading the paper?' she says, and I glance through the cafe window where the man in the corner has looked up from his newspaper and is staring at us. 'That's my grandad.'

After Kim and I have parted, I wander around the shops.

'What kind of look are you after?' asks a young sales assistant at a make-up

counter. ‘A natural kind of look?’

‘Something natural, yes,’ I tell her.

She invites me to take a seat and talks me through various products from the ‘Barely There’ range, briskly rubbing foundation onto the back of her hand and dabbing it onto my cheeks. Her own make-up is heavy like a mask and her face hovers close to mine as she works. I close my eyes and pretend she is Lily as she dusts my nose, chin and forehead with powder and shines my lips. I want to feel her fingers on my face forever.

Afterwards, I wander into a clothes shop in my natural make-up picking up items and holding them next to my body, stretching the sleeves along my arms imagining how they would look on Lily, wondering if she would have chosen them for herself, wondering if she would have made me take them back to the shop if I had bought them for her. I pick up a pair of shoes and one of the young women comes over and asks if I would like to try them on. I ask her for Lily’s size, knowing they won’t fit, but even so I sit on the low stool provided and squeeze my toes inside them. The assistant watches me. She is probably only Lily’s age – or the age Lily would be now. She might even be the same school year as Lily. They might have been at the same school.

‘I’ll take them, they’re perfect,’ I tell her.

‘Really?’

She fiddles nervously with her jewellery – a word I can’t read in gold letters on a chain around her neck. Her name, perhaps.

‘They’re not for me,’ I tell her and the young woman looks relieved, lets go of her necklace and takes the shoes from me, putting them in their box and covering them with a thin layer of tissue paper.

I find myself in a bookshop next, in the children's section where I sit on a beanbag to read about a princess who has to spin gold for the king. A boy and a girl sit next to one another on another beanbag, poring over an annual the girl holds on her lap. The girl traces its words with her finger as she whispers them to her brother. Their brindled heads touch as he leans against her to show her something in the book. Their mother catches me watching them and tells her children she will be 'just over there'. She points at the crime section where one or two others are killing time.

The boy's concentration reminds me of John hunched over his encyclopaedia of space. The girl is long-limbed and sits with her legs stretched out in front of her just like Lily used to. I see traces of them everywhere. I close my eyes to experiment with not looking and I hear the boy whisper to his sister 'that lady's fallen asleep'. There is a rustle as they move off and when I open my eyes they have gone.

I take the book about straw and gold to the till.

'Do you know about the local author event we're hosting this evening?' the bookseller asks.

She gestures at a poster and a pile of books displayed on the counter. The image on the poster and on the cover of the books shows a block of flats that looks a bit like the building I live in and a woman who doesn't look like a bit like me. The sky is red, as if it is burning.

'The author's coming here to speak about his work,' the bookseller tells me, and I turn the book over in my hands.

Rob smiles at me from the back cover. I tell the young woman I'll stay and she says there's three pounds off the price of the book if I buy a copy at the event. She turns

the 'Open' and 'Closed' sign around on the shop door and I take Rob's book back to my beanbag. I recognise Nikki in a description of her bangles and bare feet on the first page and I am there too, arriving flustered and polite, wiping my feet. Rob wasn't even present the first time I came to his house so how can he know what happened?

The bookseller spreads a white table cloth on a nearby table and arranges books and bottles of wine while I read. I read and read and the reading is what I have been writing, what I have been living. I read about Marcel, about Fox, about my mother and my children, about the omelette I make, mirrors I look in, sexy underwear I wear. An odd sensation steals over me, as if I don't exist outside of the words I am reading, these words in which I have been shaped. I feel naked, my heart knocks loudly in my chest. I am having an out of body experience.

I turn the book over in my hands and study the author photograph and when I look up again a small crowd has gathered and here comes Rob in his crumpled linen jacket. A leather satchel hangs from his shoulder, newer and smarter than the one he used to take to work. He is ushered to a seat by a slender young woman in a mannish suit. The bookseller pours wine into plastic cups. I spot Nikki standing by the door. She wears a white sheath dress which shows off her bump.

The young woman introduces Rob to the crowd and he smiles, scanning our faces.

'So, firstly, thank you for being here,' the young woman says.

'You're most welcome,' Rob says, placing his leather satchel on the floor next to his chair.

'Why don't we begin with you telling us a little bit about your book?'

Rob explains that his book is written in the first person from the point of view of a

woman.

‘Yes,’ says the mannish young woman. ‘And yet you, if you don’t mind me saying so, are a man...’

Rob smiles at her and tells her you don’t have to be a woman to write as one.

‘I know women,’ he says. ‘I live with one.’

The wine tastes unpleasant but the ridges on the plastic cup are a comfort. I run my thumb up and down them.

‘Your wife’s here, I think?’ The young woman lifts herself up off her chair slightly to search among the crowd but she doesn’t see Nikki, even when she gives a modest wave from the doorway of the shop.

‘A writer can only write about themselves,’ Rob says. ‘This book is all about me.’

‘So you’re saying it’s autobiographical?’ the young woman asks.

‘I am,’ Rob says.

He touches his hair with both hands, smoothing it behind his ears.

The woman asks Rob if he will read a section from his book and he says he will. He takes a copy out of his smart leather satchel and turns to a page marked with a strip of paper. The description he reads is of a woman hovering close to another woman as she works. One woman closes her eyes and wishes she could feel the other woman’s fingers on her face forever. The words feel like a message, as if Rob is trying to tell me something, but what?

When he stops reading, people clap and the bookseller invites us to buy copies of his book. Rob will sign them for us, she says. The crowd breaks up with some people heading to the till and others approaching Rob’s table.

I move towards the door.

‘Do I exist?’ I ask Nikki.

‘Bobbi!’

She laughs and takes my arm.

‘Want to get your book signed? Rob will be so pleased to see you.’

‘How’s Marcel?’ I ask, but she doesn’t hear me. She has my hand in hers and she is leading me through the crowd, gliding ahead of me like a ghost.

‘Look who’s here,’ she says to Rob.

She wears a striking necklace made out of gold. It is more of a collar than a necklace, with spokes that have tiny letters on the end, spelling out the title of Rob’s book. He glances at me and excuses himself to the customer whose book he has just signed.

‘Sorry,’ he says. ‘I just have to say hello to someone...’

The customer thanks Rob and moves off, tucking his book under her arm.

‘I hope you enjoy it,’ Rob calls after her, twisting the cap back onto his fountain pen. Then he turns to me.

‘Bobbi, it’s so nice to see you. Thank you for coming. How are you?’

‘Who am I?’

Rob laughs. ‘How are you? Are you well?’

‘I don’t know... am I?’

‘I told Bobbi you’d sign her book for her,’ Nikki says, lifting it out of my hands.

She places it on the table in front of Rob and he uncaps his pen. He looks up at me.

‘Bobbi or Roberta?’

‘What?’

‘Who shall I write it to? Bobbi or Roberta?’

‘You decide,’ I tell him.

‘Bobbi,’ Nikki tells him. ‘With an ‘i’

He signs my book with a flourish then blows on the ink to dry it. He hands it back to me and leans across the table to kiss me on both cheeks. He kisses me first on one cheek and then on the other but the second kiss catches me by surprise and instead of his lips landing on my cheek, he kisses me on the mouth. Nikki laughs and I leave the shop in a hurry.

‘Don’t you want your book?’ she cries out after me but I am running.

I run as fast as I can but I can’t get away from the smell of Rob’s aftershave in my hair as I race through the streets, trying to shake off the phantom at my back, the someone who is chasing me.

I dream I am getting married. In my dream, Jade is helping me choose a wedding dress. We look through catalogues together. Then we are in the pages of a catalogue trying on wedding dresses. Jade is trying on dresses, turning around and around showing me how they look. As she spins around she turns into Lily. She and I visit the place we will get married and it is the beach in one of the photographs in Nikki’s hallway. The sand is soft between our toes and there are parrots in the trees. It is just me and Lily. We are on a desert island. We are getting married.

I wake up from the dream and I am desolate not to be with my dream girl. Little Legs doesn't like it when I cry. He jumps off the bed and paces around the flat weaving silently from room to room. When he can't find what he's looking for he comes back into my bedroom and stands on his hind legs, clawing at the bedclothes, driving his snout underneath the duvet, trying to lever me out of bed.

Eventually, his protests have me on my feet. I pull on some clothes and put him on his lead. We let ourselves quietly out of the flat. The sky is burning red and the rest of the world is sleeping, it seems. It's too early for street cleaners - or newsagents, even - Sameer's shutters are down. Little Legs and I pass the library and head towards the station.

I smoke a cigarette under a lamppost then tug Little Legs up the front steps where I take a hand shaped doorknocker in mine. I could knock loud enough to wake the dead but I replace the knocker carefully without making a noise. I peer through the letterbox. The double buggy stands at the bottom of the stairs and in the half-light I can see the indentation Marcel's body has made in its fleecy lining. I snap the letterbox shut and from inside the house I hear Pinch bark.

The plant pots are too heavy to lift so I scrabble the earth with my bare hands. Little Legs watches me as I work fast to unpack the earth. On the other side of the door Pinch paces back and forth. I can hear the thud of his tail. I yank out the ornamental tree and chuck it into the road. Pushing the pot with my foot, it smashes down the steps. Pinch barks and inside the house a light goes on.

'Quick, Little Legs, run!

He scampers after me, trailing his lead. When we are safely around the corner I

scoop up its end and we walk home singing ‘Morning Has Broken’ at the tops of our voices.

* * *

When we let ourselves into the flat I can tell right away Lily is home because my straighteners are hot and the vanilla perfume she wears hangs in the air.

‘Lils? Is that you?’

She won't come out of her bedroom so I have to speak to her from the other side of the door. I tell her about the new shoes I bought.

‘You can try them on if you like,’ I tell her.

She opens the door a crack.

‘Hello, sweetness.’

She is a young woman now but she is still my sweet girl.

‘Let’s see the shoes,’ she says.

I fetch them and pass her the box through the crack in her door. She removes tissue paper from the box, takes out one of the shoes. She loves them, I can tell.

‘Wear them if you like,’ I say.

I persuade her out of her room to watch television and we flick through the channels until I find a Nature documentary. Lily stretches her legs across my lap, her feet hanging off the end of the sofa in the new shoes.

On the television a mother spider regurgitates prey for her babies.

‘Clever mama spider,’ I say.

Lily points out that perhaps she's not so clever – extra digestive enzymes she has produced in order for her to eat more prey are melting away her insides, leaving just her heart and ovaries.

‘Her body becomes a highly nutritious food source for her offspring who proceed to eat her’ says the narrator.

‘Come to think of it, I’m starving,’ Lily says.

‘What do you want? Biscuits? Pizza?’

‘Both.’

The mother spider offers her body as both grave and nursery so fetching snacks for my ghost girl is the least I can do.

Fox texts.

u ok?

I text him back.

clearing L’s room

take yr time x

She lies on her bed listlessly scrolling through her phone while I go through her clothes, holding up items and asking if she remembers this skirt or that top, asking her if they still fit. She tells me how good my new shoes would look with every outfit. She wants to borrow them but I won’t let her. If I deny her the shoes she will stay.

‘I don’t want you not to exist,’ I say.

‘What are you talking about?’ she asks.

‘I don’t... I don’t want you to not exist,’ I repeat, but she isn’t listening, she has turned her attention to her eyebrows, which she is plucking, complaining to anyone who will listen that she has a monobrow.

Into a bag for the charity shop goes the mirror she used to look in. Somebody else will look in it now. I keep her nail varnishes and her perfume, her coconut moisturiser. I will paint my own nails in her colours, sweeten and moisturise my own skin, even as cells shed and are replaced. I remove post-it notes from the wall around her desk, some have rules and equations and scientific facts written on them, others have Shakespeare quotes in her childish handwriting.

*Lend me a look-glass.
If that her breath will mist or stain the stone,
Why then, she lives.*

She is annoyed when I try to flatten out the creases in the pencil portrait she drew of her grandmother. I want to frame it and put it on the wall but she won’t let me.

‘I’ll have it in my bedroom where no-one will see it apart from me,’ I say but she won’t allow it.

‘It’s rubbish,’ she says.

She tells me her feet are cold.

‘Look, they’re turning blue!’ she says. ‘What I need is a nice pair of shoes.’

‘You can’t have them.’ I tell her. ‘you can only borrow them.’

'I hate you!' she shrieks. 'You're the worst mother in the world!'

The violence of her passion floors me but I would have this any day over her absence. She has been gone such a long time. In the end, after days of her pestering, I let her have the shoes and sure enough, as soon as she gets what she wants she disappears.

* * *

The date for Kim's hearing comes around. We arrange to meet outside the Family Court. Andy is with her when I arrive. When she sees me she throws down her cigarette and grinds it under her foot.

'Fucking freezing,' she says, thrusting her hands into the pockets of her padded coat.

Jade is in her buggy, swaddled in a puffer jacket against the wind which whistles up the main road.

'She's looking so grown up!' I say.

'Yeah, she's getting big,' Kim says, bouncing from one foot to the other trying to keep warm. 'Do you reckon Connor will come? 'I don't reckon he will. He doesn't care about us, he only cares about himself.'

We lift Jade's buggy up the steps. Inside the building a security guard ushers us one by one through a metal detector. Kim goes first and as the guard scans her body from head to toe, sweeping his baton around her ankles and around Jade's buggy, I pretend we are taking a holiday together. But instead of going through customs to board a plane we get into a lift which takes us up to a courtroom.

'I don't reckon he'll be there,' Kim says, checking her reflection in the mirrored walls of the lift, tugging at her hoop earrings and tightening her ponytail. 'He won't even bother to show up.'

Andy glances at me and Kim catches the look he gives me.

'What?' she says, jutting out her chin at him. 'Do you know something I don't?'

'I don't know anything,' Andy says. 'All I know is that Connor is bad news.'

'I know that, don't I!' she says in a loud voice. 'You don't have to tell me. Wish I'd never set eyes on him.'

Kim's social worker ushers us into a blue carpeted room full of pale furniture. There is a coat of arms on the wall. We are shown where to sit. Kim gets Jade out of her buggy and jiggles her on her knee but when the door opens she passes her to me. Connor walks in, accompanied by his social worker. He takes a seat on the other side of the room, as if we are relatives at a wedding and he is on the groom's side. He doesn't look at Kim but she doesn't take her eyes off him.

We are asked to stand when the judge enters through a different door. Connor hauls himself to his feet, as if a great effort is required. The judge tells us to sit and she sits herself, behind a desk on a raised podium. She explains that unless Kim can guarantee Jade's safety, her care will be handed over to a foster family. Her voice is gentle but firm when she asks Kim if she understands what is being said.

'Please answer yes or no,' she says, and Kim says 'yes'.

The judge tells us Connor is permitted to see Jade only during supervised contact hours and then we are asked to stand again while the judge leaves.

'Is that it?' I ask, and Andy tells me that it is.

Kim's social worker suggests we wait for Connor to go before we make our move.

'He 'ain't seeing her - no way,' Kim says loudly.

Connor grins at her as he lopez towards the door and Kim's social worker lays a hand on her arm.

'Don't let him wind you up.'

'Too late,' she shouts, and she hurdles the rows of seats to hit him and scratch him. Andy and her social worker scramble after her while I turn away, holding Jade close. But a funny thing happens – when I clasp Jade's head to my chest, her soft baby hair comes off in my hands. The curls float out of my fingers like dandelion down and when I look at Jade she has a proper haircut and she is grown. Her arms stick out of the sleeves of her puffer jacket and her legs dangle awkwardly, her feet touching the floor.

'But you're so big!' I cry as she steps away from me. 'Look how tall you are!'

She takes my hands in hers and we skip around the courtroom. Her new big-girl hair streams out behind her like a flag.

'Look how straight and long it's grown!' I marvel. 'Did you make a bargain with the king?'

'The king, yes!' she cries.

'It's like someone else's hair,' I say.

'It is someone else's hair!' she tells me. 'I had extensions put in!'

'Like Lily wanted!'

'Who's Lily?' she asks and she laughs so prettily I can't believe she was a baby only moments ago.

'You were a baby only five minutes ago!' I say and I tell her how amazing she is, how good she is at dancing and skipping and talking.

'Are you feeling alright, Bobbi?' Andy asks.

Kim and Connor have gone and the courtroom is empty. Andy takes Jade from me and hands her to the social worker who puts her in her pushchair and wheels her into a side room where I catch a glimpse of Kim sitting at a table, her head in her hands.

Andy tells me he will give me a lift home. He links his arm in mine on our way down in the lift to the car park. Arm in arm we must look like an old married couple and yet the truth is, Andy doesn't even know where I live, I have to tell him my address.

On the journey I ask what will happen to Jade.

'It's likely she will be removed,' he says, staring ahead into traffic.

'I could look after her.'

'It's not us who makes the decision, Bobbi.'

'Whose decision is it?'

'There are a number of agencies involved.'

I ask him if I could become her guardian. I've looked after her, she knows me.

We have a relationship. I don't like the idea of her going to strangers.

'The local authority would go to a lot of trouble choosing an appropriate setting for a case like this,' Andy says, trying to reassure me.

'All the same, they're strangers - they don't know her like I know her. She's been to my home, she spent the night.'

'I think Jade will be fostered in a different part of the country,' he says, slowing the car as we approach my road.

'Is this you?' he asks.

He turns into my street and I point out my flat. He pulls up outside.

'I'm sorry, Bobbi,' he says. 'I'm just being realistic.'

I thank him for the lift and get out of the car. He leans across the passenger seat, craning forward so that his seatbelt stretches taut.

'They prefer a clean slate... A blank page, if you know what I mean?'

As soon as I am indoors I take out Lily's old diary and I sit down to write. The silver pencil feels heavy in my hand as I write about Jade's puffer jacket, the mirrored lift, the blue carpeted room.

It's getting late and Little Legs and I are at the park. We sit on a bench near the patch of burnt ground where the bowling green clubhouse once stood. There is no breath of wind, everything is still. A spider hangs motionless in its web. It's as if something is about to happen.

'Got a cigarette?'

It is the guy with the teardrops tattooed on his face. I offer him my packet of fags.

'Your last one.'

'Take it.'

Little Legs takes a few steps towards him as Teardrop puts the cigarette in his mouth. I flick my lighter and its flame burns in the gathering darkness.

'Sorry to ask but spare the price of a cup of tea? Sorry to ask, sorry to ask.'

I empty the contents of my purse into his cupped hands and he thanks me then limps quickly away. Little Legs follows him along the path. When I whistle, Teardrop turns around. He sees Little Legs and signals to me, pointing at the dog, as if to let me know he is there. I raise a hand and wave. Teardrop waves back. Little Legs pauses, halfway across the park, but he doesn't move. I whistle once more but he doesn't move. He is caught between us, rooted to the spot by his four silly paws. Then Teardrop whistles.

‘Go on then,’ I say, and my mother’s dog trots after his new owner.

* * *

I stop going to Life Skills, I stop going to the park. I stop shopping at Sameer's.

Here for you x

I stop texting Fox. Andy tells me Kim is back with Connor and Jade is to be handed over to foster parents for a trial period. It will become a permanent arrangement if Kim can't make the changes her social workers are asking her to make.

Their taking Jade. Told u they wld

She asks if I will come with her to the family court.

'I'll come,' I tell her, 'but I don't know what I can do.'

'You can't do nothing, Bobbi, no-one can. You know what it's like to lose a daughter, though.'

A Shakespeare quote I learned at school floats into my head, something about how tender it is to give suck but I need Lily's post-it notes to remember it properly and I have stripped her room bare.

Kim arrives early, with Jade looking pretty in her best dress. She wears a new gold bangle Kim has bought her 'so she remembers me.'

We carry her buggy up the stairs and Kim sits on my bedroom windowsill to smoke a cigarette. She fiddles with her disposable lighter, tossing it from one hand to the

other. Lighter fluid bounces inside its amber casing, like nectar.

‘Think you’d die if you fell out?’ she asks, gesturing out of the window.

‘I reckon so.’

‘I reckon so an’ all. Smash yourself to bits. Either that or you’d be a vegetable.’

She stares at her daughter in my arms and takes a last drag of her cigarette before tossing it out of the window.

‘I need a drink,’ she says. ‘You alright with her if I go to the shop?’

‘Have you got time?’

‘Got to be there for twelve. What time’s it now?’

Jade and I watch her out of the window. The bell on the shop door rings as she disappears inside. In half an hour we will be in the blue carpeted room of the family court with its raised dais and the coat of arms above the judge’s chair. Kim’s social worker and Andy will be there, and maybe Connor too. Jade’s new foster parents will be there.

The bell rings once more and Kim comes out and crosses the road, a 350ml bottle of whisky weighing down the pocket of her coat. The judge will smell the drink on her breath and order Jade to be looked after by foster parents, for there to be phone contact only with the birth mother.

My door buzzer goes.

She will be adopted if Kim fails to convince social workers she is capable of looking after her.

‘What shall we do?’ I ask Jade.

The intercom buzzes again and Jade turns her head in the direction of the sound.

‘Uh!’ she says.

‘Oh!’ I say. ‘Did Jade hear something?’

My phone rings in my bag and the little darling twists around in my arms.

‘Uh!’ she says once more.

‘Is that my phone?’ I ask her, and I carry her into the kitchen where my bag hangs on a chair.

‘Who’s calling me? Is it Jade’s mummy?’

We check my phone display and I press ‘decline’ as the door buzzer goes again, a prolonged, insistent note this time. Outside, Kim shouts up from the pavement.

‘Bobbi! Let us in!’

A small stone hits the living room window.

‘Your mummy’s a good shot!’

I close the curtains.

‘Bobbi! What the fuck? We have to be in court at twelve!’

I can hear my neighbours’ door buzzers going and a conversation at the intercom. Someone lets Kim into the building and her feet slap up the stairs, her fist pounds on my front door. Jade and I hide in my bedroom while her mother calls our names. A rattle of the letterbox is followed by a hissed ‘what the fuck’ and then silence.

I imagine her sliding to the landing floor, drinking her whisky.

‘Uh!’ says Jade, and Kim hears her.

‘Bobbi are you in there? What the fuck’s going on?’

I put my finger to my lips and then place it gently on Jade’s mouth. Her lips are perfect, like the prettiest seashell on a beach. She is a mermaid, a princess. Outside my flat, Kim is talking on the phone.

‘At Bobbi’s – she’s got Jade in her flat and she won’t let me in, fucking nutjob!
Come and sort it out... Court’s at twelve... she’s your daughter too!’

Cursing, she ends the phone call and there is a moment’s silence before I hear her talking to Andy.

‘I’m at Bobbi’s... Bobbi’s. Jade’s inside her flat and I can’t get in, there’s no answer... I dunno, I’m worried she might have had a heart attack... yes, twelve o’clock.’

She thinks I’m dead on the floor and her baby uncared for but I would never abandon Jade like that. I cough to let her know.

‘Bobbi?’

The letterbox rattles again.

‘I’m here,’ I say. ‘You go. Jade will be alright with me.’

‘What are you talking about you muppet? Let me in, I left my lighter in your bedroom.’

‘They’ll take her. You said so yourself.’

‘I’m going to fight for her - me and Connor, we’re going to get her back. If we go to court like they want, they’ll foster her for a bit and then we’ll get her back. Bobbi, let us in.’

‘I’m not going to let them take her.’

‘Nor am I!’

She bangs on the door and Jade starts to cry so I take her into the kitchen where we look in the fridge for something she might like. I show her the picture of a cow on a packet of cream cheese.

‘Moo!’ I say. ‘Can you say ‘moo’?’

Jade jigs up and down on my hip making ‘mm’ ‘mm’ noises while her mother is shouting to someone about me kidnapping her kid. My neighbour across the landing has come out of her flat to complain. I unwrap a cheese triangle and Jade mashes it in her little fist, cramming it in her mouth. I stroke her hair and tell her the story about the farmer’s daughter who spins straw into gold.

‘Bobbi, you mad cow,’ Kim yells through the letterbox. ‘Your neighbour’s calling the filth.’

‘The daughter has to fill the room with gold by morning’, I whisper to Jade. ‘So she gets a horrible little man to help her but he demands her firstborn child unless she can guess his name.’

Outside my flat, Kim is on the phone to Connor again, telling him to stay out of sight while the police are here.

‘You’ll make me lose her, Bobbi!’ she yells

‘She’s lost already,’ I tell her.

‘You’re not the fucking judge!’

But the judge will smell the whisky on her and she will see the way she looks at Connor and Jade will be handed over.

‘I can save you the pain,’ I tell her, and I tell Jade about the farmer’s daughter spying on the little man in the woods when he’s dancing around a fire.

‘What are you talking about, you nutter?’ Kim says, quieter now, from the other side of the door. ‘Bobbi, you’re freaking me out - let me in and give us Jade.’

Now she moves away and she’s talking on her phone again but I can only hear snippets.

‘Stupid cunt... get over here and sort it out!’

Her feet slap slap on the stairs and the downstairs door slams and she is out on the street again, calling Jade’s name, shouting up at the window. I reach the part of the story where the horrible little man gets so angry that he stamps his foot and splits himself in two but Jade has finished her cream cheese and is making ‘mm’ ‘mm’ noises. I take her into the kitchen and give her another triangle.

‘Look!’ I say, ‘the cow’s wearing pretty earrings!’

They aren’t earrings, they are round packets of cheese hanging from the cow’s ears. How can the cow be wearing her own self? The world is in slow motion as I tear off the thin foil wrapping of the cheese and hand it to the girl in my arms, not the farmer’s daughter, not my own daughter, someone else’s. You bear a daughter and it is almost impossible to bear.

I switch on the gas rings, counting them out loud to Jade. One, two, three, four. A box of matches next to the hob. We listen to the gas breathing gently then we creep one foot in front of the other, quiet little baby steps into the hallway so Kim can’t hear us. Her lighter is in my bedroom. In the living room we switch on the television. Loud music, kittens dancing. Jade is mesmerised. I sit her on the sofa, surrounding her with cushions, including the golden unicorn cushion out of her buggy. She watches the dancing kittens. Outside my building on the pavement below, her mother has grown hysterical and there is another voice now, a neighbour trying to calm her. I move to the window to listen.

‘What seems to be the trouble?’

It is Sameer from the shop.

‘That fucking paedo is the trouble! I’m meant to be in court - she’s going to lose

me my kid!’

Through a gap in the curtains I watch Sameer cross the road and knocks on Fox’s door. He stands outside his house, waiting. We are all waiting to see what will happen. Kim scrapes around in the gutter then steps into the middle of the street and lifts her arm. Another stone clatters against the window. In the kitchen, my phone is ringing and on the television kittens prance and dance, their mouths open and shut in time with fairground music.

My phone won’t stop ringing so I grab it out of my bag and move swiftly through the flat to chuck it out of the bedroom window. Kim yelps as it smashes on the street below. Andy is there – where did he come from? I duck quickly out of sight. My downstairs neighbours have come out of their flats and are gathered.

‘What about you, you cunt? Get back to Countdown.’

Connor. Bits of my phone case lying in the road and Kim is talking fast, she won’t stop talking but I can’t hear what she’s saying. Sameer has gone back to his shop. Now Fox’s voice at my door.

‘Can I come in?’ he says, speaking through the letterbox.

I tiptoe into the hallway and I can see his mouth through the slit of the letterbox, his eyes.

‘I’m a bit worried, Bobbi... say something.’

A loud ticking fills my head, dividing space into before and after. On the television in the living room, kittens are still dancing and in the kitchen, gas hisses. Kim’s lighter is light in my hand and a box of matches sits next to the hob. The passing of time is torture. I want to smash time, and burn it, see it splintered and broken, spattered across

the road, incinerate the seconds, minutes and hours there are left.

Fox's voice outside my door is calm but the words he is saying aren't calm.

'The police are here - they're going to have to force entry.'

There are heavy feet on the stairs and I remember the last time police came to the flat. I run into the living room to fetch Jade but the gold cushion she is sitting on lifts off the sofa and into the air. I cry out, try to catch it but it darts out of reach and I chase it into the bedroom where it hovers like a magic carpet next to the open window. Jade doesn't make a sound but she kicks her little feet to the music coming from the television. Embroidered unicorns, whinnying and snorting, peel themselves off the cushion and lose their golden sheen as they fly out of the window and disappear.

'Don't go!' I shout as Jade reaches for the unicorns but I can't shut the window in time.

She makes contact with the air and a cry goes up from the pavement below. Jade has disappeared – she was in my arms and now she is air. She is dandelion fluff. Outside, people are gathered around something I can't see. I think it might be a squirrel. Kim's mouth is open and she is straining forwards, held around her waist by a female police officer.

Fox appears, escorted out of my building by more police.

'Is it a squirrel?' I call to him out of my open window but he doesn't answer.

Kim is screaming but sound is delayed, and it's only after a moment that I can hear her and it's as if I've heard that scream before, coming out of my own mouth instead of hers. Then the front door of my flat splits open with a harsh cracking sound and the room is full of strangers.

* * *

I am wearing shoes which aren't mine. These ones squeak on a shiny floor. They remind me of other shoes that squeaked on another shiny floor but I can't remember whose. I think I wrote about the other ones but I don't read what I write, I just write. I write and I am written. I am not a non-person and I am not an outline of a person but this is a ghost story and I am the ghost. When I finish writing, what is written will be all that's left of me.

All that will be left will be marks on a doorframe and these words.

No sharp objects allowed but when someone is with me I can write. I am given a silver pencil that has a propelling lead and a pink rubber at the end.

I am writing a story and soon I'll write the end. It's coming soon, I can feel it.

Here it is.

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